

KIERKEGAARD AND THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

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Such is the criticism commonly passed upon Socrates in our age, which boasts of its positivity much as if a polytheist were to speak with scorn of the negativity of a monotheist, for the polytheist has many gods, the monotheist only one. So our philosophers have many thoughts, all valid to a certain extent; Socrates had only one, which was absolute.¹

So too with Kierkegaard. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard the thinker thinks one thought and thinks this thought through to its completion until, in thinking this one thought, the thought has thought itself out and is no more to be thought. Kierkegaard the religious sage invites us to take “offense” at this thought, the thought that annihilates itself by announcing the “Absolute Paradox.” He exhorts us to rejoice in the “shipwreck” of reason, the “crucifixion” of the understanding,² that this thought betrays. Kierkegaard the prophet enjoins us to harken to the absolute loss of meaning disengaging the measured thinking of the philosopher.³ Kierkegaard the poet summons the silence harboring us in the wake of the withdrawal of the divine. Kierkegaard thinks one thought throughout these stations. This thought is the furtive, fugitive thought of the radical discontinuity of thinking with reality. A strange thought, for if thinking is radically discontinuous with reality, then surely thinking cannot transcend itself to think the difference of thinking and reality. For certainly the radical alterity of thinking and reality is unthinkable. Thinking itself is strange, however, for not only is it animated by virtue of⁴ this radical alterity, but it is its pain and passion to leave itself behind to founder⁵ upon the unthinkable. On this Kierkegaard is insistent: in thinking we cannot surmount the breach of thinking with reality, though we can only too painfully discover this breach, for thinking always and everywhere presses into this breach.

Here we are already involved in a counterpoint with the tradition. The tradition consummates itself by uncovering thinking and reality as the fulfillment of each other in a unity-in-difference. Inasmuch as experience always designates the relationship with presence, whether that relationship be in the form of consciousness or not,⁶ thinking has defined itself as the consummate legitimation of presence in the self-presentation of thinking; so that thinking can be construed as a holding oneself

open in the unconcealing of the presencing of the present, such that this holding oneself open is a holding open *of* the unconcealing of the presencing of the present. Kierkegaard, coming as he did after the consummation of philosophy in Hegelianism, felt painfully how such a notion of thinking completely glosses over the problem of the “poor existing individual,” which is to say, of human existence, and for this reason located himself in opposition to the philosophy of his day. His relation to the tradition is ambiguous. His thought is at once contained within it and yet transgresses⁷ it, and it is impossible to separate the two. Kierkegaard inhabited philosophy in order to destroy its structuring of the univalence of thinking and reality. Operating necessarily from within, borrowing all the strategic and judiciary resources of subversion from the old, notably Hegelian, structure, borrowing them structurally (as for example in the enigmatic, possibly ironic, possibly earnest, probably parodic opening passage of *The Sickness Unto Death*⁸), Kierkegaard’s enterprise of destruction nonetheless, in a certain way, falls prey to its own work. In haggling with Hegel, Kierkegaard is thoroughly dominated by him, and his way is a centrifugation away from the pull of the Hegelian dialectic that for this reason is governed by it. But Kierkegaard, by refracting himself through the multiple deflections of his pseudonyms, fully appreciated this fate, and, in fact, held himself steadfast in it.

Kierkegaard gainsaid the tradition by restoring primacy to existence, that is, human existence. Existence, for him, is a synthesis of thinking and reality; the two meet and are contradicted in it. But this is not a simple difference, nor a simple identity. Existence is not a closure of the breach between thinking and reality, nor is it a concrescence of thinking with reality. Even though the two meet in existence, they are held apart in basic opposition. This breach is not to be surmounted, nor can it be removed by the legerdemain of Hegelian dialectics. Existence is not a simple disengaging of the radical alterity between thinking and reality. There is no resolution of each into the other, there is no reconciliation of the two; only tension, the tightrope tension between the torpor and the terror of living in the zone of the breach. It is with Kierkegaard that thought is first broached within the breach between thinking and reality. Thought is the nothing of the breach, and the breach is the nothing which thinking cannot think. The breach renders thinking by rending it. The rupture of thinking from reality is not just the pitiful experience of an utterly alienated man by the name of Søren; rather, with Kierkegaard the rupture itself becomes for the first time *the* philosophical problem, and the other to thinking, or to subjectivity, or to the self, “manifests” itself accordingly as the completely other.

Only insofar as the rupture of thinking from reality, the insurmountable and irreparable breach between the two, becomes the basic fact of existence does the problem of the other become the problem of the completely other. But this happens without a vicious tailspinning into solipsism, for the other is other with respect to the subject, and the subject *is* only as long as it stands over against the other. But how can the completely other leave its complete otherness behind and enter, however marginally, into *its* other? It would seem that the very concept of

complete otherness is, although alluring, a dangerous fallacy, for the completely other to the subject is by definition so completely removed from the subject that it cannot even be approached, never mind appropriated: it can never present itself, not even as the completely other, but then, precisely never as the completely other. But such flippant condemnation is a bit thoughtless, and it is based on the metaphysics of the Same, which is precisely what Kierkegaard is struggling to “leap”⁹ out of. That there can be no completely other is a pronouncement that can only be made by the metaphysics of the Same, of which Hegelianism is the culmination. In the metaphysics of the Same, the complete otherness of the completely other dissolves as soon as the completely other finds its presentation in the self-presence of consciousness. That is to say, no thing can be absent, exterior to the possibility of presentation to the self-presence of consciousness. The completely other is dissolved in the circuitry and circulation of meaning within the Same. It becomes other only in virtue of its difference. But this difference is an indifferent difference, which is to say, the other becomes other than itself.

The completely other can abide in its complete otherness (and also be known *as such*) only if there is some indication of complete otherness within the breach, only if there is some intimation of pure exteriority, of pure inaccessibility and complete resistance to signification that is a signification without context signifying *nothing at all*. The completely other does not enter into experience directly but rather leaves its imprint on it, where this imprint cannot be thought as simply present. It sets up an “acoustic illusion.”¹⁰ To keep sight of this rupture, a synthesis is required in which the completely other is announced as such — without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity — within *its* other. When the other, the completely other, which is to say the other as such, announces itself as such for Kierkegaard, it does so in an occultation by presenting itself in the dissemblance of itself. Kierkegaard forges his thought in the hollow of this absolute breach: in discontinuity, and in deflection, dissimulation, and defeasance, in the intractable resilience and the inexhaustible reserve of what cannot appear, in thoroughgoing deferment. It is not that this breach (this rupture, that not even Thom’s catastrophe theory, despite its power, can capture) *resists* appropriation, for it does not impose any exterior limit upon it. The rupture began by breaching alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation breached and finally revoked. In fact (if it makes sense to talk about facts here — a point of contention for Kierkegaard), the breach is its own idea (in the Cartesian sense of the term) and as the idea of the breach it breaches the thinking that presumes that meaning circulates within the order and register of the Same. That is to say, the idea of the breach breaches thinking: it is that upon which thinking founders even as it founds thinking, so that thinking is nothing but the disproportion between the idea of the breach and the breach of which it is the idea.¹¹ The idea of the breach is the mode of being, the breaching, of the breach, and not its being breached. Thinking is the effect of the breaching, and not its production. Rather the breaching of the breach produces the site and source of thought.

The one thought of Kierkegaard is to seek out the trace of the completely other

in the rupture of thinking from reality. To think this trace, however, is to displace, ever so slightly, the other. It is to shift it just this side of its complete otherness; to shift it by touching it¹² — but by a touching that is not an assimilation. The trace is where the other, the completely other, is touched even in and precisely because of its otherness — without, however, transferring the completely other into simple presence. *To think is to engage in an act of oblique and clandestine complicity with the completely other.*

As a long as experience is constituted by that which experiences distinguishing itself in experience from that which is experienced there is the other — and the longing to find communion with it. As long as the other is experienced as being able to enter into experience, the other can be registered within the circuitry and circulation of meaning. But it can be registered, that is to say, *be*, and be the other, only if it is *distinguished* by its presence. But this presence can only be the presence of an unaccountable absence.

Presence irrupts into the rupture of thinking from reality by virtue of the trace of withdrawing absence the presence of which is only vaguely felt, that is, by virtue of the trace of the completely other in experience. Without this nonsimple presence of the trace of complete otherness in experience, presence could not be distinguished as presence for there would be nothing from which to distinguish it.

Because of the dominance of the metaphysics of the Same, that is, the dominance of antipluralism, the ontological problem of what constitutes the region of the rupture is maybe even inadmissible, for the only topology available for determining its structure is the topology of the Same, where the other is automatically assimilated as the (in)different deformity of the Same. Kierkegaard transgresses metaphysics — seen as it was in his day as the demand for the totalization of being within the self-enclosure of “immanence” — by sighting within the site of this totalization of being the disrupting effects of “transcendence.” Kierkegaard does not think some simple deformity accountable in terms of a topology of difference indifferently occurring within the order and register of the Same. Rather, Kierkegaard thinks the irruption within this order of the excess and exorbitance and eccentricity of transcendence.

Yet human existence stands forth into this rupture, and stands forth *in* this rupture, even though it is not a simple inhabiting. Rather, in standing forth in the rupture of thinking from reality, human existence animates it as the place in which the withdrawal of absence grants the gift of presence. Within the domain of thinking there is no question of the withdrawal of absence, for thinking is certified self-presentation. Thinking is the articulation of the presence of absence and not its withdrawal, and yet thinking is the effect of this withdrawing absence. Thinking takes place in virtue of taking the place of this withdrawing absence. Furthermore, within the range of reality — if it is even possible to think reality by itself without reference to the thinking that thinks about it — there is no question of this withdrawal, for reality is presence pure and simple. It is, as Kierkegaard is fond of saying, “immediacy.” But where thinking and reality meet and are held apart in their opposition, absence plays with presence as an actor plays his role. This, of

course, does not decide the idealism/realism issue. It does not even address it, for it is properly speaking not a metaphysical issue at all, inasmuch as the problem is not so much the ontological structure, the topology, of the presentation of absence as it is the problem of what is not presented in presence and of what is presented in and by the withdrawal of absence.

Kierkegaard has it that the divine is the absolutely other, the completely other in its absoluteness of otherness. In the framework of the problematic outlined here, the problem of the absolute otherness of the divine can be addressed — for it now can become a problem. In the metaphysics of the Same, the divine is the infinite *logos*, the source and medium of all presencing, including the presentation of the self to itself in its own self-presence. But with the advent of the Kierkegaardian revocation of and repulsion from the metaphysics of the Same, the divine can now be assessed in its absolute otherness. Human existence stands forth in the breach between thinking and reality, but the divine does not, precisely because this breach is the place of contradiction, the place where the play of withholding and holding forth comes to pass. To stand forth in the breach the divine would have to present itself in some measure in the immediacy of presence. But Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that there is nothing immediate about the divine. The presentation of the divine can only come about through its withdrawal from presence. In terms of the tradition, the divine is the *transcendens* pure and simple; it is never present, never immediate. Yet the divine enters into the breach: by withdrawing from it, but in such a way that by withdrawing it leaves a trace. The divine breaches the breach and thereby produces the possibility of thinking the breach — but not its breaching, for this is unthinkable. The trace of the divine is the exposing of its withdrawing without thereby revealing the divine. That is, in withdrawing the divine draws us into its vanishing wake, and it is in this wake that the trace is encountered.

Whereas God is understood within the “metaphysics of presence” as the name and element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge, for Kierkegaard the divine is a furtive etching on the far side of self-presence, an etching, fugitive and fleeting at that, of ambiguity and paradox imprinted onto the experience of self-presence from the other side of self-presence. But, of course, according to the tradition there is no side to self-presence other than the inside. To be filled with the fullness of the divine, to be fulfilled in the fullness of the divine, to be confirmed in the “transparent grounding”¹³ in the source of presence — that is the longing. But how to achieve this is the issue. The approach to the divine becomes problematical only insofar as the divine has withdrawn into the reserve of its absolute otherness and holds itself in an intractable withholding. To throw the matter back to the tradition, the divine is the ground of all presence and self-presence, and for this reason is not itself presented in presence but rather withholds itself so presence can be presented. Presence involves a trace of its source, the withdrawal of absence.

Before the issue of how to approach the divine can be sought as the space within which Kierkegaard’s thought orbits, its secular avatar, the problem of language, must be traced out along the delicate nether-edge of its dialectic. But the problem

of language has to do with the *commercium* between the subject and the other, that is, with the unity of referent, signified, and signifier. To this extent the problem of language has some connection with the problem of the numinous. This connection is further strengthened when the poet is addressed as the spokesman for the numinous. I address him as such, for the poet seeks the divine, a sensitivity to the divine and a sacred participation in its mysteries. And the poet does so by seeking to invest language with an element of the divine.

In this way the thought of Kierkegaard can be seen to revolve around two axes, the major one being the endeavor to open up a pathway to the divine, the minor one the problem of language, with these two axes joined in a fulcrum bearing the weight of human existence. These two axes meet in the poet, for he is the adventure into the numinous through a responsiveness to language. I venture into the orbit of Kierkegaard's thought with some hesitancy for my approach will necessarily be exorbitant: I am both godless and in no measure a poet. But the exorbitance of my venture is still determined by the two axes of Kierkegaard's thought. To be godless is to long for a pathway to the divine, which now means that a trace of the divine in its absolute otherness is still found etched in what takes place just this side of complete otherness but is nevertheless not simply present in it; and to be in no measure a poet is to need the words of the poet, to heed them and sanction them.

Language can be possible only on the basis of a dissociation of the subject from reality, of a "nonimmediate" relation of the subject to reality. For in the case of an immediate association of the subject with reality, there could be no distinction of that which experiences from what is experienced, and so that which experiences could not distinguish itself as standing over against that which is experienced. There would just be experience, nothing more nor less...if even that. Of this it is quite proper to say that there is no 'subject' and no 'reality'. But if so, we could not speak about *reality*; ergo, language is possible only given a distinction between the subject and reality. Moreover, language draws out and reinforces this distinction. It would seem that the relationship between language and this distinction between the subject and reality cannot, in good conscience, be spelled out, for we cannot extricate ourselves from language to recover experience that is not conditioned by language. This experience, if it is even imaginable except as a nostalgia for what has never been and what could never be, would be the primeval state in which there is just experience without the fragmentation into that which experiences and that which is experienced. And if it is impossible to recover this state, then it is impossible to proceed from this state to language-based experience and the distinction between the subject and reality, so as to determine which has ontological priority, language or the subject-reality distinction, or whether they are equiprimordial and thus codeterminative of experience.

This problem of ontological priority becomes decisive with Kant inasmuch as the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a project of providing transcendental grounds for experience. The entire problematic of the *Critique* can be brought to light in these terms. The focus of the *Critique* is on the "highest principle of all synthetic judgments":

“the conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are likewise conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*” (A158=B197). Such is the primordial integrity of experience – and the distinction made within it – that Kant proves this principle by showing that the principles of pure understanding are possible through that which they themselves make possible, namely through the structure of experience. The circularity of such proofs is indispensable to the Kantian program for only by such circularity is he able to legitimate the conditions for the possibility of experience *as* entering into experience by conditioning it. Without a sensitivity to the circularity that is at the basis of experience, Kant is crudely discredited by claiming that the Kantian construction of experience is not found in experience. What Kant says of the principle of understanding is decisive: “it has the peculiar character that it makes possible the very experience which is its own ground of proof, and that in this experience it must be *presupposed*” (A737=B765; italics mine). In this way, Kant has demonstrated that experience is a circular happening through which what lies within the circle becomes exposed as the breach between thinking and reality. What lies outside the circle is in part the inaccessible “transcendental unity of apperception” and in part the “*Ding-an-sich*”: the transcendental unity of apperception is not found in experience, rather it is the purely formal principle of the unity of the manifold of experience; and the *Ding-an-sich* is, of course, the completely other to experience. Experience takes place in the circularity of the breach, in the double reflection in and of experience from thinking (the transcendental unity of apperception) to reality (the *Ding-an-sich*) and from reality to thinking. Experience draws both the transcendental unity of apperception and the *Ding-an-sich* into experience as formal principles conditioning experience, but by drawing them into experience, experience conditions them. The exact manner in which experience conditions the conditions for the possibility of experience, the way in which they are elicited in experience, is a problem tangential to what is at issue here. It is evident that Kant provides a unitary ground for experience, but this ground is given only transcendentially – and that means here as a necessary presumption.

Whatever the relationship between language and the distinction within experience between the subject and reality may be, this much can be ascertained transcendentially, that language cannot be separated from this distinction. There can be no question of ontological priority of one over the other. Each is the basis for the possibility of the other: language is possible only on the basis of a distinction between the subject and reality; and this distinction can be made within experience only if the subject defined itself as distinguishing itself from over against that which is experienced, and this it can do only through language.

So it is reasonable to think that since experience, in its differentiation into subject and reality, is possible only insofar as it is conditioned by a transcendental principle of formal unity, language functions as a way of restoring the unity between the subject and reality, and this not so much by a direct retrieval of the undifferentiated state of experience as by a “repetition” that incorporates the *principle* of the unity of the primeval state of experience into another state; and

incorporates this principle as the *presumptive* basis for the commerce between the subject and reality. Despite the forbidding intricacy of the problem of language, Kierkegaard's point is quite simple, and, in principle, unassailable: this unity is only a presumption. We cannot extricate ourselves from the conditioning of experience by language to examine the veracity of the claim of such a unity; and we cannot overcome our entrenchment in the differentiating nature of experience to disclose this unity without abrogating experience.

Experience is the comportment of a human being, and the mode of being of this entity is existence. Existence is the place in which thinking and reality meet and yet are in basic contradiction. For this reason, existence stands forth into the rupture of thinking from reality. The nature of language must now be examined in light of this fact of existence.

This signifier directs us to overlook it so that what it intends — the referent — can emerge as the object of our attention. But the referent, that is, reality, is never present in its purity and immediacy. Rather, the referent is thoroughly mediated by the signified, by the meaning of the signifier. And the signified is possible in its unity of meaning only by referring back to the totality of a meaningfulness, a context; that is to say, by being thrown back into language. The signifier holds the referent before us by bringing it into a context of meaning through the mediation of the signified. Language promotes its own effacement so that thinking might pass over the word to the reality the word intends. And yet reality is never attained, it is just intended as the word recoils back into its bed in language. From the moment the sign appears, which is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity, the integrity, the simplicity, of reality.

As for the exact nature of the relationship of language to thinking, that is forever a mystery. But this much can be said, and I offer this as the heart of Kierkegaard's thought: in holding open the relation to the absolutely other, thinking breaks with language. This relation, as we shall see, can be held open only by a silence that effaces itself in the face of the world of meaning. Language presents the subject taking up its position in the world of its meaning, and because of this incarnation of thought it would seem that thinking cannot be distinguished in its purity from its linguistic vestures and its implementation in existence. In this way, language reveals itself as the interior structure, the topology, of the rupture of thinking from reality. The hermeneutical circularity of language is nothing more than the circularity of experience. Language is the *via rupta* by which thinking and reality infiltrate into the breach, meet, and are contradicted. What then is the meaning of silence? For Kierkegaard, I shall show, it is the summonings of the completely other, and a responsiveness to the absolutely other, but in such a way that this summonings and this responsiveness happen in an ineffable and self-effacing way.

The dominant assumption of the philosophical tradition is that language is the voice of the *logos*, where the *logos* is the source and ground of *full* presence. Language, according to the tradition, is the plenipotentiary of the *logos*. The

presumption of this view is that speech is always full speech, dreaming its own inexhaustible plenitude. Accordingly, speech is both the disclosure of presence in its fullness and the occlusion of any occultation. By holding open the radical discontinuity of thinking and reality, by illuminating the rupture of thinking from reality, Kierkegaard takes this assumption to task by portraying the radical alterity between the word and the reality it intends, the essential incommensurability and insuperable difference of the two. The mystery of language is that it promotes the oblivion of this difference *even while it further entrenches it*. By speaking we appropriate the other, but this act of appropriation is possible only by a prior dissociation, so that what is appropriated is appropriated by drawing it out of its reserve of otherness. But this is an act of forgetfulness. What is forgotten is the intractable otherness of the other, that it can never fully enter into the fullness and openness of presence, but retracts itself to ever so small a measure and withholds itself however marginally in its otherness.

But what of the absolutely other, the completely other in its absoluteness of otherness? In other words, what of the divine? By speaking about the divine, we do not draw it out from out of its absolute otherness, not even marginally. The absolutely other is absolute precisely because it absolves itself of every relation and from every relation. What is spoken about is the trace of the divine, for the divine is always and everywhere pure exteriority. At best, by speaking of the divine we presume it and then initiate an ichnology of it searching for indications, pointers, traces of the divine, but never uncovering it. In approaching the divine the task is the explication of the *vestigium Dei*, the *deus absconditus*, and the text is the world as its trace. How, then, do we learn “to speak broken heaventalk”¹⁴ when any attempt to speak of the divine is a disappointing deflection from it?

Kierkegaard suggests a way of harkening to the “wafting of the god” (“*Ein Wehn im Gott*”).¹⁵ of letting the divine shine forth through its traces: by becoming silent. Only in the “act of becoming silent” can the fullness of the divine be opened to us so that we may receive it, or more precisely, so that it may receive us.¹⁶ The ichnology of the divine is the science of sacred silence, and to speak of silence is to develop an archeology of silence as it is found in the terrain of language. Language is the intelligibility of the accessible,¹⁷ but the divine withholds itself in its inaccessibility, so to approach the inaccessibility of the divine is to transgress language in an act of silence. This is not to transcend language and its world, but to transgress it, to violate the intelligibility of being. The world of language, and this means the topology of what lies within the circularity of experience, is exposed, more precisely *ex-posed*, in the extremity of its inherent pathologies, of the deformity, the topological deformity, of the zone of the breach. It is not so much a question of transcendence but of refusal, for transcendence implies the invocation of a transcendental signified, yet the elimination of any transcendental signified is just what is at issue here. Since speech is never the voice of full presence but the mediation of the fully present by catachresis, that is, the *presumption* of full presence, the passage to the divine is a restoration, by a certain absence and by a sort of calculated effacement, of presence disappointed of itself in speech. Speech and the conscious-

ness of speech, which is to say consciousness as auto-affection, are given their possibility in the suppression and exclusion of any exteriority to presence pure and simple, in the oblivion of the incommensurability of thinking with reality. This possibility is fulfilled in the lived reduction of the opacity of the word; and this reduction is the origin of presence. And the divine enters into the present only by leaving it and leaving its trace behind, its stamp, its seal...but only after it has already left. The art of keeping silent is the art of maintaining oneself in a transgression of the presumed transparency of the word, of recognizing the absolute opacity of the word when it comes to approaching the exterior to presence, the absolute other, and of leaping from the interior of this linguistically oriented presence into its ineffable exterior by reaching into the reserve of this exteriority. Only then, only with a refusal that is a granting, can a rapprochement be initiated with that which is absent in presence and yet is present in its absence by virtue of its trace and seal.

As long as one speaks, one can know only the metaphor language provides and not the reality behind it, for precisely this is occluded by language and deflected from language by language. And one knows this metaphor *as* a metaphor, i.e., as the absence of the reality behind it. "...the sipspeeches of all mankind have foliated (earth seizing them!) from the root of some funner's stutter."¹⁸

As long as one speaks.

Thus Kierkegaard has it that "God is in heaven, man upon earth – therefore they cannot well talk together."¹⁹ Elsewhere we find that "in the temporal world God and I cannot talk together, we have no language in common."²⁰ And yet in this world there is an echo, coming from the other side of the abyss, of the divine, the absolutely other. This echo, this trace, of the divine, though unintelligible, is still *there*, but it does not receive its voice in and through immediacy pure and simple. The echo of the divine is the peal of silence. Kierkegaard suggests this when he says "even if *He* does not speak, the fact that everything keeps silent in reverence before Him affects one as if He were speaking."²¹ The language of the divine is a mute speech transcribed into unintelligibility: "The fall (babadalgharaghtakamminarron-konnbronntonnerronntounnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoordenenthurnuk!) of a once wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy."²² Also in this text of the unintelligibility of the absolutely other we find:

– For his root language, if you ask me whys, Shaun replied, as he blessed himself devotionally like a crawsbomb, making act of oblivion, footmouther! (what the thickuns else?) which he picksticked into his lettruce invention. Ullhodturdenweirmudgarrdgringnirurdrmolnirfenrirlikkilokkibaugimanddr-rerinsurtkrimgemractinarockor! Thor's for yo!

– That hundredlettered name again, last word of perfect language. But you could come near it, we do suppose, strong Shaun O', we foresupposed. How?²³

One hearkens to this echo of the divine, not by deciphering the "hundredlettered name," but by remaining silent. "To pray is not to hear oneself speak, but it is to

be silent, to wait, until the man who prays hears God.”²⁴ Before the divine, as the story of Abraham testifies, one cannot speak. He who, in an act of faith, disposes himself before the unfathomable mystery of the divine “is unable to speak, he speaks no human language. Though he himself understood all the tongues of the world, though his loved ones also understood them, he nevertheless cannot speak — he speaks a divine language...he ‘speaks with tongues’.”²⁵

But Kierkegaard realizes that the act of appealing to the divine by remaining silent and hearkening to the peal of silence must be consummated in speech, for silence cannot contain itself, but must be “carried through” in an affirmation of it by speech.²⁶ The thrust beyond the hermeneutically closed structuring of existence by language, which the act of silence inaugurates, is the refusal to enter into its dominant topology and the granting of its exteriority. But the thrust must fall back into the circularity of experience, that is to say, into language, to receive its confirmation. Silence needs to be sealed by speech, otherwise it is as if nothing is vouchsafed in the act of silence. And in fact, not *as if*, because nothing takes place, nothing is disclosed, for nothing is exterior to the world of language. But the words spoken in the affirmation of the act of silence do not repeal or revoke the silence; rather, they preserve it. For this reason the words “carrying through” the act of silence do not say anything; they are born out of the unintelligibility of the rapprochement with the divine and so are as a message in an undecipherable code.²⁷ We find testimony of this in other authors, as, for example, in the “Adagia,” where Wallace Stevens comments that “poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully,”²⁸ and that “poetry is the search for the inexplicable.”²⁹

The speech consuming silence without thereby legislating it is not the speech of the poet, for it is as unintelligible as the tentative echo of the divine, yet the poet seeks to open the numinous out into intelligibility in a revelatory consecration of the sacred. If a sense of the numinous can only be attained in an act of silence, if the act of silence is the only act that can countermand our entrenchment in estrangement from the divine, and if this silence is consummated in unintelligible speech, then the poet, it would appear, cannot fulfill his vocation of naming the numinous. To the extent that the divine withholds itself, language measures the extent to which we have departed from the divine; and to the extent that the divine can only be accosted in an act of pious silence, the poet remains unaccomplished.³⁰ Hölderlin, the first witness of the withdrawal of the divine, speaks everywhere of the anguish accompanying the failure of poetic speech to announce the presence of the divine. If Hölderlin was the one who asked what are poets for in a destitute time, and if Nietzsche was the one who announced that the poets can now for the first time play, then Kierkegaard, standing between these two, proclaimed that the poet was first and foremost destitute in a destitute time. Kierkegaard is, if anything, the thinker of the withdrawal of the absent origin.

Kierkegaard diminishes the role of the poet, for the poet cannot broach the silence of the faith that relates one absolutely to the absolute. For Kierkegaard, the poet is the “genius of recollection” praising the hero, he is the “hero’s better nature,”³¹ for the poet gives eloquent expression to the “universal” revealed by the

hero. Yet the poet, or so Kierkegaard says, must recoil in impotence before the absurdity of faith and the silence it entails.

So Kierkegaard says. But Kierkegaard, through the *persona* of Johannes de Silentio, eulogizes the act of silence that faith requires in a “dialectical lyric.” He offers a “panegyric upon Abraham” (which self-consciously fails) extolling his glory to all. Johannes de Silentio repeatedly denies that he is a poet,³² and yet Kierkegaard by his own admission is a

...peculiar kind of poet and thinker who...has nothing new to bring but would rather read the original text of the individual, human existence-relationship, the old, well-known, handed down from the fathers – would read it through yet once again, if possible in a more heartfelt way.³³

Kierkegaard the philosopher can justifiably deliver the dialectic of silence, but Kierkegaard the poet is somewhat hesitant to intrude upon the holiness, the piety of Abraham’s silence:

Should not one dare to talk about Abraham? I think one should. If I were to talk about him, I would first depict the pain of his trial. To that end I would like a leech suck all the dread and distress and torture out of a father’s suffering, so I might describe what Abraham suffered, whereas all the while he nevertheless believed.³⁴

Note here the subjunctive flavor of the poet’s admission into the life of faith of Abraham.

And yet Kierkegaard the poet summons silence out of its shroud of unintelligibility into the light of poetry. This however does not pervert the silence Abraham maintained in his faith, which is the archetypal silence, nor does it reduce its unintelligibility to something more acceptable; rather, Kierkegaard the poet finds himself commissioned to speak here, even if in a subjunctive mood, and, as always, in an ambiguous voice:

Venerable Father Abraham! Thousands of years have run their course since those days, but thou hast need of no tardy lover to snatch the memorial of thee from the power of oblivion, for every language calls thee to remembrance – and yet thou dost reward thy lover more gloriously than does any other; hereafter thou dost make him blessed in thy bosom; here thou dost enthrall his eyes and his heart by the marvel of thy deed.³⁵

The ambiguity in this passage is striking. Language calls forth silence, every language, or so we are told; it calls it “to remembrance.” According to Johannes de Silentio, silence does not need the ministrations of the poet. Yet Johannes breaks his own silence to give voice to silence, to proclaim it as a lover would his beloved – and in so doing achieves a state of grace.

But now for Abraham — how did he act? For I have not forgotten, and the reader will perhaps be kind enough to remember, that it was with the aim of reaching this point I entered into the whole foregoing discussion — not as though Abraham would thereby become more intelligible, but in order that the unintelligibility might become more desultory.³⁶

Kierkegaard is ambiguous about poetry, for poetry, with the advent of the withdrawal of the divine, is ambiguous as to its purpose: how to interpret the unintelligible peal of silence; how to decipher the intractable trace of the divine so that a pathway is opened that leads through this trace back to it. With the withdrawal of the divine, poetry must initiate a new voice, an “abnihilation of the etym,”³⁷ that will draw the divine back into the rupture, and that will sew the suture of this rupture. The best the poet can do is hold open the relation to the faint, furtive, fugitive echo of the divine, to hearken to the foreign sounds the peal of silence sings. But above all, to wait...

Speech, this speech, becomes conscious of its inherent delinquency in not being able to eliminate the impasse silence (im)poses, in not being able to eliminate the self-concealing activity of speech in proposing the pathway the problem takes, and in not being able to eliminate the self-effacement in ex-posing the structure of the problem. The impasse here intimated seems to be the rite of passage for our time. Perhaps new ways can institute themselves in thinking, opening the possibility of transgressing the closure of determinative meaning that is termed philosophy.

But as it stands now, this thought, Kierkegaard’s thought, has come into its passion and perversion. It has come before its own effacement in facing what for it is unthinkable, or at least ineffable. It would seem necessary not to recoil from the ineffable, but to persevere in this perversity of silence as it gives way to the intelligibility of discourse without thereby giving away what lies behind and beyond this intelligibility, and without giving away the completely other in its dissemblance in discourse. It would seem necessary, as Derrida has argued, to effect a “grammatology,” a “science of the *effacement* of the trace,” and not just an ichnology, a science of tracing out the trace, or a sygetics, a study of silence. It would seem necessary to recognize that the trace broached here in the thought of Kierkegaard is the effacement of the trace in its inscription within the “closure of presence.”

Kierkegaard’s writings provoke and promote the affirmative reduction of sense, and not (yet) the deliberate destruction of sense, nor (yet) the exploitation of a certain nonsense lodged within sense. He broaches the breach. For with Kierkegaard, thinking consists in holding open the relation to the absence of origin by means of soliciting the loss of meaning dissimulated in the circularity and circulation of meaning within a philosophical closure. By thinking as he does, Kierkegaard holds open this relation. But he necessarily cannot step into it, nor can he ever command it. All he can do is hold thinking open so that it can be ready for the

appearance of an “acoustic illusion.” But in so doing he leaves the hermeneutical circle, and leaves it breached.

The writings of Kierkegaard form a signpost on the way to uncovering the complicity of a ‘something else’ in the circularity and circulation of meaning within the self-enclosure of the Same. He commends thinking to the transgression of the *logos*, to exceeding by a sort of unreserved expenditure just this closure. I have tried to show in the course of this paper that this reading of Kierkegaard is not yet another exercise in the “deconstruction” of the tradition. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate that Kierkegaard is *the* proto-deconstructivist, for he was the one who first placed thinking, with “fear and trembling,” before the absolute loss of meaning. He seems to be the first to open thinking to a relation with the ineffable and the self-effacing:

...one should not think slightly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker’s passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. But the highest pitch of every passion is always to will its own downfall; and so it is also the supreme passion of the Reason to seek a collision, though this collision must in one way or another prove its undoing. The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think.³⁸

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. David Swenson and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 12, n. 2.
2. Cf. especially *ibid.*, pp. 46–67. Also cf., e.g., *Papirer VIII*¹ A11, 1847: “It is specifically the task of human knowing to understand that there is something it cannot understand and to understand what that is. Human knowing usually has been occupied with understanding but if it will also take the trouble to understand itself, it must straightaway posit the paradox. The paradox is not a concession, but a category, an ontological qualification which expresses the relation between an existing cognitive spirit and the eternal truth.”
3. Cf. *Papirer X*⁶ B80; “The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge.” Cf. also *The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 173–74: “...for God is that all things are possible, and that all things are possible is God;” in conjunction with pp. 171–72: “The decisive thing is that for God everything is possible. This is eternally true, and true therefore at each instant. In a way, this is commonly recognized and commonly affirmed; but the decisive affirmation comes first when a man is brought to the utmost extremity [*Yderste*] so that humanly speaking there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible – that is to say, whether he will *believe*. But that is completely the formula for losing one’s understanding; to believe is precisely to lose one’s understanding in order to win God...Thus salvation is humanly speaking the most impossible thing of all; but for God all things are possible!”
4. Cf. *Papirer X*⁶ B81: “Finally it is one thing to believe by virtue of the absurd (the formula only of the passion of faith) and another to believe the absurd. The first expression is used by Johannes de Silentio, the second by Johannes Climacus.”
5. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, tr. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 53: “...repetition [the irruption of the breach in the order and register of the Same] is the

- interest* [*inter-esse*, one of Kierkegaard's favorite terms, meaning both interest and being between] of metaphysics, and at the same time the interest upon which metaphysics founders."
6. Jacques Derrida persistently argues that such is the insistence of what we know by the name of metaphysics.
 7. Transgression is a fundamental category for Kierkegaard. He calls it "sin" and it registers the effect of transcendence, of breaching immanence, of radical alterity, unaccountable and intractable, and absolute loss of meaning. Cf. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), where Kierkegaard is involved in explicating the philosophy of sin: p. 13, sin "has a definite place, or rather, it has no place, and that is what characterizes it;" and p. 19 where he develops the notion of a "*secunda philosophia*" in contradistinction to *prote philosophia*, which studies the totality of being insofar as it rests within the "immanence" of its self-enclosure. This *secunda philosophia* is the study of "that of which the nature is transcendence."
 8. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 146: "Mind is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self." The rest of this paragraph is a succinct Kierkegaardian statement.
 9. Cf. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, p. 29: "Really its [sin's] whole substance is concentrated in the clause: *Sin came into the world*. If this were not so, then sin would have come in as something accidental, which man would do well not to try to explain. The difficulty for the understanding is precisely the triumph of the explanation, its profound consistency in representing that sin presupposes itself, that it so came into the world that by the fact that it is, it is presupposed. Sin comes in as the sudden, i.e., with the leap; but this leap posits at the same time the quality; but when the quality was posited, the leap that same instant turned into the quality and was presupposed by the quality and the quality by the leap."
 10. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 63: "But precisely because the offense is thus passive, the discovery, if it be allowable to speak thus, does not derive from the Reason, but from the Paradox; for as the Truth is *index sui et falsi*, the Paradox is this also, and the offended consciousness does not understand itself but is understood by the Paradox. While therefore the expressions in which offense proclaims itself, of whatever kind they may be, sound as if they came from elsewhere, even from the opposite direction, they are nevertheless echoings of the Paradox. This is what is called an acoustic illusion."
 11. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, tr. T.H. Croxall (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), pp. 148-49: "Immediacy is reality. Speech is ideality. Consciousness is opposition or contradiction. The moment I express reality, the opposition [between my speaking and the reality I am speaking about] is there. For what I say is ideality."
 12. The metaphor of touching is at least as old as metaphysics proper. Aristotle develops the concepts of *haphē* (the word appearing in *De Anima* for "touching," meaning "having in one's grasp") and *thigein* as used in *Metaphysics* VII, 10, which carries the sense of brief contact. The language of touching occurs in Aristotle as an ambiguous attempt to reform the Platonic doctrine of noetic intuition. Cf. Stanley Rosen, "Thought and Touch: A Note on Aristotle's *de Anima*," *Phronesis* 6, no. 2 (1961):127-37.
 13. *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 163.
 14. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 261.
 15. Rainer Marie Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, third Sonnet.
 16. Kierkegaard, "The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air, Three Godly Discourses," in *Christian Discourses*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 322-24.

17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 432: "Language is the intelligibility of being."
18. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 96.
19. "The Lilies of the Field," p. 323.
20. *Fear and Trembling* (with *The Sickness Unto Death*), p. 46.
21. "The Lilies of the Field," p. 328.
22. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 3.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
24. "The Lilies of the Field," p. 323.
25. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 123.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 126–28.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 129: "In speaking Abraham is speaking no untruth, but neither is he saying anything, for he speaks in a foreign tongue."
28. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 171.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
30. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 127: "...for no poet can catch up with Abraham."
31. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
32. *Ibid.*, e.g., p. 99: "I am no poet, I go about things only dialectically."
33. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 5.
34. *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 63–64.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
37. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 353.
38. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 46.