CHAPTER 11

Kierkegaard's speculative despair

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> Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement. This is the continual leap in existence that explains the movement, whereas mediation is a chimera, which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and which is also the only thing he never has tried to explain.
>
> (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* p. 42)

Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel concerns primarily the failure of a philosophy of reflection to take account of that which exceeds reflection itself: passion, existence, faith. The irony in Kierkegaard's challenge to Hegelianism is, however, minimally twofold. On the one hand, Kierkegaard will ask, where is it that Hegel, the existing individual, stands in relation to the systematic totality that Hegel elucidates? If Hegel the individual is outside the complete system, then there is an "outside" to that system, which is to say that the system is not as exhaustively descriptive and explanatory as it claims to be. Paradoxically, the very existence of Hegel, the existing philosopher, effectively—one might say *rhetorically*—undermines what appears to be the most important claim in that philosophy, the claim to provide a comprehensive account of knowledge and reality. On the other hand, Kierkegaard's counter to Hegel consists in the valorization of passion and existence over reflection and, finally, language. It is in relation to this criticism that a different sort of irony emerges, one which Kierkegaard appears not to know, but which attends his various claims to be writing on behalf of that which is beyond

speculation, reflection, and language. If Kierkegaard is right that Hegel omits the existing individual from his system, that does not mean that Kierkegaard maintains an unsystematic or nonspeculative view of the existing individual. Although Kierkegaard sometimes uses the speculative terminology of Hegelianism, he appears to parody that discourse in order to reveal its constitutive contradictions. And yet, in Kierkegaard's descriptions of despair in *Sickness unto Death* (1849), his use of Hegelian language works not only to displace the authority of Hegel, but also to make use of Hegelianism for an anlaysis that both extends and exceeds the properly Hegelian purview. In this sense, Kierkegaard *opposes* himself to Hegel, but this is a vital opposition, a determining opposition, one might almost say 'an Hegelian opposition,' even if it is one that Hegel himself could not have fully anticipated. If Hegel's individual is implicated in the very existence that he seeks to overcome through rationality, Kierkegaard constructs his notion of the individual at the very limits of the speculative discourse that he seeks to oppose. This appears to be one ironic way, then, that Kierkegaard's own philosophical exercise is implicated in the tradition of German Idealism.

DESPAIR AND THE FAILURE TO ACHIEVE IDENTITY

In the following, I will try to make clear why *despair* is a category or, in Kierkegaard's terms, a sickness and a passion, whose analysis is crucial to both the extension and critique of Hegel in Kierkegaard's work. Insofar as despair characterizes the failure of a self fully to know or to become itself, a failure to become self-identical, an interrupted relation, then despair is precisely that which thwarts the possibility of a fully mediated subject in Hegel's sense. That subject is documented in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an emerging set of syntheses, the subject as one who mediates and, hence, overcomes that which initially appears as *different from itself*. The success of this mediating activity confirms the capacity of the subject to achieve self-identity, that is, to know itself, to become at home in otherness, to discover that in a less than obvious and simple way it *is* that which it incessantly encounters as outside of itself.

Hegel narrates in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* the various ways in which this mediating relation can fail, but insofar as Hegel claims that subject is substance, he defends the ideal possibility of articulating the *successful mediation* of each and every subject with its countervailing world. The various failures to mediate that relation effectively are only and always instructive; they furnish knowledge that leads to more effective

proposals for how to mediate that apparent difference. Each time the subject in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* claims to discover the condition by which the mediating relation works, it fails to take into account some crucial dimension of itself or of the world which it seeks to bind together in a synthetic unity. That which it fails to comprehend returns to haunt and undermine the mediating relation it has just articulated. But that which remained outside the relation is always recuperated by the subject's synthesizing project: there is no final or constitutive failure to mediate. Every failure delineates a new and more synthetic task for the emerging subject of reflection. In a sense, Kierkegaard enters Hegel's system at the end of the *Phenomenology:* if Hegel thought that the subject of the *Phenomenology* had taken account of everything along the way which turned out to be outside the terms to be mediated, understanding *what* needed to be synthesized as well as how that synthesis could take place, then the last laugh is on Hegel's subject. In its mania for synthesis, the subject has forgotten to include that which can never be systematized, that which thwarts and resists reflection, namely, its very existence and its constitutive and mutually exclusive passions: faith and despair.

In Kierkegaard's view, despair is precisely that passion that can never be 'synthesized' by the Hegelian subject.[1] In fact, despair is defined by Kierkegaard as "a misrelation" (*SUD,* 14),[2] one which confirms the failure of any final mediation and, therefore, signals the decisive limit to the comprehensive claims of the philosophy of reflection. Despair not only disrupts that subject's efforts to become at home with itself in the world, but it confirms the fundamental impossibility of ever achieving the self's sense of belonging to its world. The Hegelian project is not only thwarted by despair, but it is *articulated in despair* (*"the category of totality inheres in and belongs to the despairing person": SUD,* 60). As we shall see, one form of despair is marked by the effort to become the ground or origin of one's own existence and the synthetic relation to alterity. A kind of arrogance or hubris, this conceit of the Hegelian project suffers a humiliation at Kierkegaard's hands. To posture as a radically self-generated being, to be the author of one's will and knowledge, is to deny that one is constituted in and by that which is infinitely larger than the human individual. Kierkegaard will call this larger-than-human source of all things human "God" or "the infinite." To deny that one is constituted in that which is larger than oneself is, for Kierkegaard, to be in a kind of despair. Toward the end of this essay, we will consider just how crucial this form of despair is for Kierkegaard's own authorship. Indeed, it may turn out that the despair that Kierkegaard diagnoses in *Sickness unto Death,* and which, in part, he attributes to Hegel, conditions essentially the very writing whose object it is to denounce and overcome despair.

So despair is a "misrelation," a failure to mediate, but what are the

terms to be mediated? And if Hegel fails to understand (his own) despair in the system he articulates, is it also true that Kierkegaard fails to understand the speculative conceptualization that inheres in the very notion of despair by which he counters speculation?

The opening page of *Sickness unto Death* appears to be a properly Hegelian exegesis populated with familiar terminology: 'self,' 'spirit,' 'mediation,' 'relation.' And yet, as the first paragraph proceeds it becomes clear that Kierkegaard is parodying Hegel's language; significantly, however, this is a parody that does not entail a thorough rejection of Hegel. On the contrary, through parodying Hegel, Kierkegaard both recirculates or preserves some aspects of Hegel's system and jettisons some others. Parody functions like the Hegelian operation of *Aufhebungy* set into motion this time, ironically, by Kierkegaard to preserve, cancel, and also transcend the Hegelian corpus itself. The crucial dimension of *synthesis* is, of course, absent from this Kierkegaardian redeployment of Hegel. Parody functions for Kierkegaard as an *Aufhebung* that leads not to synthesis between his position and Hegel's, but to a decisive break. Kierkegaard does not lay out his arguments against Hegel in propositional form. He re-enacts those arguments through the rhetorical construction of his text. If the issues he has with Hegel could be *rationally* decided, then Hegel would have won from the start. Kierkegaard's texts counter Hegel most effectively at the level of style, for part of what he wants to communicate is the limits of language to comprehend that which constitutes the individual. Let us, then, consider the way in which this argument is performed through the parodie reiteration of Hegel at the outset of *Sickness unto Death*.

Kierkegaard begins Part One of this text with a set of assertions and counter-assertions, splitting his own philosophical voice into dialogic interlocutors, miming the dialectical style which dates back to Socrates: "A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self?" (*SUD*, 13). Then comes a ponderous sentence which one might expect to encounter at the hilarious limits of rationality in a Woody Allen film: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself." The first part of the sentence is a disjunction, but it is unclear whether the disjunctive "or" operates to separate alternative definitions or whether it implies that the definitions that it separates are essentially equivalent to one another. Prior to the semicolon, there appear to be two definitions: one, the self is a reflexive relation (the self is that which takes itself as its own object), and two, the self is *the activity* of its own reflexivity (it is that process of taking itself as its object, incessantly self-referential). If this is an Hegelian exposition, then one expects that this self will achieve harmony with itself, but here it

seems that the more the possibility of a synthesis is elaborated, the less likely that synthesis appears.

In the above quotation, then, we might ask: can the self both be the relation and the activity of *relating*? Can the differently tensed definitions be reconciled? Is the first a static conception, and the second, a dynamic and temporalized one which is incompatible with the second? Or will we learn, Hegelian style, that the static notion is *aufgehoben* in the second, that the temporalized version of the reflexive self presupposes, transforms, and transcends the static one? After the semicolon, the sentence appears to contradict the definition of the self as static relation and to affirm the temporalized version of the self, thereby undermining the possibility of an emerging synthesis between the two versions: "the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to the self." The original ambiguity over whether the "or" functions to set up a mutually exclusive set of alternatives or a set of appositional and equivalent definitions appears temporarily to be resolved into the first alternative.

The development of the sentence echoes the narrative logic of Hegel's *Phenomenology,* but in that text it is more often the case that mutually exclusive alternatives are *first* laid out only then to be synthesized as part of a larger unity. Already in Kierkegaard's style of exposition, we see how the expectation of an Hegelian logic is both produced and undermined. Indeed, as the paragraph proceeds, that failure to conform to Hegelian logic turns into a full-blown illogic, a kind of high philosophical comedy. The rest of the paragraph reads as follows:

> A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

Here the development of what appears to be an argument takes several illogical turns and seems by the propelling force of rationality to be spiraling into irrationality. By the end of the first sentence, we have concluded (a) that the self is temporalized, (b) that it is the *activity* of relating, and (c) that it is *not* a static relation. The possibility of a synthesis is therefore negated. This next sentence, however, poses as a logical consequence, but only to make a mockery of logical transition. Here we have the sudden and unwarranted shift from a discussion of the "self" to that of the "human being," and the announcement that the human being is a synthesis. Moreover, the terms of which that synthesis is composed are in no way implied by the static/temporal opposition that preoccupied the preceding sentence. Instead, we find wild generalizations asserted at once in the mode of a conclusion and a premise. As a conclusion that follows

from the earlier sentence, this second sentence makes no sense. As a premise, it is equally absurd: the synthesis is asserted and described, and then the appearance of a conclusion emerges, "in short, a synthesis," which can be read only as a flagrant and laughable redundancy.[3] A didactic sentence follows, which is itself nothing other than a repetition of the obvious: "a synthesis is a relation between two." And then a most curious sentence concludes the paragraph in which Kierkegaard appears to take distance from the Hegelian voice that he has both assumed and mocked. "Considered in this way," the sentence begins, suggesting that there might be another way, Kierkegaard's way, "a human being is still not a self." Here Kierkegaard offers a distinction to suggest that what is called "the human being" is not the same as the self. But interestingly, we are also recalled to the problem of the temporality and tense of the self. What is described as the human being is "still not a self," not yet a self, a self that has not yet been articulated, or, rather, cannot be articulated within the language of synthesis.

Kierkegaard proceeds to take issue with this self which seems never to coincide with itself. He remarks that any synthesis requires a third term. The second and third paragraphs proceed in a note of tentative seriousness, making use of an Hegelian schematic precisely in order to show the way beyond it. The second paragraph begins: "In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation." The examples of the terms to be related are the "psychical and the physical" in this textual instance. Kierkegaard argues that if the self is a synthesis of psychical and physical dimensions, and if it is *also* the activity of relating its psychical aspect to its physical aspect, then that very act of relating will have to be composed of one of those aspects. Here he assumes that the activity of "relating," a term that seems to have been kept purposefully abstract in the previous discussion, calls now to be specified as a psychical activity. This more specifie determination of that relating activity will become even more significant as Kierkegaard's text proceeds to distinguish between *reflection,* the Hegelian way of understanding that constitutive relation, and *faith,* Kierkegaard's preferred way. As this semi-Hegelian exposition proceeds, Kierkegaard will show what is concretely at stake for the existing individual in this abstract logic.

Kierkegaard begins here to confound the distinction between the self as a static relation and the self as a temporal or active one. The two dimensions of the self to be related must already in some sense *be* the very relation, which is to say that psychical and the physical, as parts of the relation, are defmitionally related, that is, presupposed as related, and are constantly in the activity of becoming relating. These two dimensions of that relation cannot be captured by a logic of noncontradiction. The

reflexivity of this relation is what marks the relation as a self. For it is the distinguishing feature of a self to endeavor to become itself, constantly and paradoxically to be in the process of becoming what it already is. For one can always refuse to 'relate' to oneself, to endeavor to become a self, but even then that very refusal will still be a way of relating to the self. To deny that one has a self, to refuse to become one: these are not only modes of reflexivity, but specifie forms of despair.

This paradoxical view of the self, as that which incessantly becomes that which it already is, coincides partially with Hegel's view of the subject. Hegel argues that the subject of the *Phenomenology* will develop and become increasingly synthetic, including all that it discovers outside itself in and as the world. And this subject, which successively appears to be identified as life, consciousness, self-consciousness, Spirit, Reason, and Absolute Knowledge, discovers finally that *implicitly* it has always been what it has become. The *becoming* of the Hegelian subject is the process of articulating or rendering explicit the implicit relations which constitute that subject. In this sense, the Hegelian subject is successively discovering what it has always already been, but has not known that it has been. The development of constitution of the Hegelian subject is the process of coming to know what it is that that subject already is.

For Kierkegaard, however, this view of the subject is only partially true. For Hegel, the subject is every aspect of this relation: the subject is itself, the activity of relating, and that to which it relates (since the world, or Substance, turns out to be synthetically unified with the subject). It is precisely this circle of immanence, however, that Kierkegaard tries to break; he performs this break, however, by working Hegel's own logic to its own breaking point. A new paragraph following the above exposition graphically enacts the break with the Hegelian argument. Kierkegaard states an either/or question that cannot be asked within the Hegelian framework: "Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another." Here Kierkegaard raises the question of the genesis of this relation. It is not enough to know what the relation constitutes, nor to know that in some way it constitutes itself. The question remains: What has constituted this relation as a self-constituting relation? What put this circular relation into motion? Kierkegaard infers that there must be a relation that is temporally prior to the self-constituting self, that this prior relation must be reflexive and constituting as well, and that the self must be one constituted product of that prior relation. This prior relation appears to be God, although Kierkegaard almost never supplies a definition of God.

PASSIONATE SELVES AND THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard makes clear that he is not interested in proving rationally that God exists, but only in the question of how to achieve faith as it arises for the existing individual: how do I become a Christian, what relation can I have to faith?[4]

If that which constitutes the self remains part of that self, then the self whose task it is to take itself as its own object will of necessity take that prior ground of its own existence as its object as well.[5] It is in this sense that for Kierkegaard the self which takes itself as its own object will of necessity take "another" as its object as well. In Hegel, this same formulation applies, but the "other" who constitutes the self will be the social other, the community of other subjects who collectively supply the common social and historical world from which the particular subject is derived. That move, however, is for Kierkegaard symptomatic of a refusal to see that which transcends the social and human world, namely, the transcendent or the infinite from which the social world in its concreteness is derived.

The task of the self, for Kierkegaard, is indissolubly twofold: self-constituting yet derived, the self is "a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (*SUD,* 13–14). Insofar as "another" is infinite, and this prior infinity constitutes the self, the self partakes of infinity as well. But the self is also determined, embodied, and hence finite, which means that every particular self is both infinite and finite, and that it lives this paradox without resolution. Faith will be described by Kierkegaard as infinite inwardness, the unceasing and passionate affirmation of the infinite, and in this sense faith will be an occasion for infinity to emerge within the self: "that which unites all human life is passion, and faith is a passion" (*FT,* 67).[6] In yet another sense, that self, however capable of infinite faith, will never be equivalent to the infinity that is prior to the individual, which Kierkegaard calls "God," but which is sometimes figured in terms of infinite possibility.[7] However infinite in its passion and faith, the self is still *existing* and, hence, finite. Strictly speaking, the infinity prior to the self, the infinity from which the self emerges, does not *exist*. For unactualized and infinite possibility to exist, it would have to become actualized, which is to become finite and, hence, no longer to be definable as infinite possibility. This infinite possibility, this ground or God, cannot be known or affirmed as a finite object, but can only be affirmed by a passionate faith that emerges at the very limits of what is knowable.

This is an affirmation that cannot take place through rationality, language, or speculation; it emerges as a passion and a possibility only on the condition that reflection has failed. In Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), he refers to this crisis in speculative thought as "the passion of Reason" and "the passion in all thinking" (*PF,* 46).[8] Here passion carries the meaning of suffering and longing, and Kierkegaard appears to imply that passion is generated precisely at the moment in which thought fails to grasp its object. Because part of what is meant by comprehending an object is comprehending its origin, and because that origin or ground is the infinity of God, every act of knowing is haunted by the problem of faith and, hence, also by passion. Kierkegaard commentator Niels Thulstrup describes this passion as "something which reason cannot comprehend and which leads reason to founder in its passion, the passion which wills the collision, which strives to discover that which cannot be thought and cannot be comprehended in the categories of human thought."[9] In the face of the infinite, thought can only supply a finite concept or a word, but both of these are finitizing instruments which can only misconstrue and, indeed, *negate* that which they seek to affirm. This is, of course, also the problem with Hegel's reliance on the concept to grasp infinity.[10]

One might be tempted here to think that Kierkegaard proposes that the self overcome its finitude in order to affirm through passionate inwardness the infinity from which that self emerges. But that is, for Kierkegaard, an impossibility. And here is where he appears to take Hegel seriously, even as he finally disputes him: the self is inevitably both finitude and infinitude which the self lives, not as a synthesis, and not as the transcendence of the one over the other, but as a perpetual paradox. Inasmuch as the self is self-constituting, that is, has as its task the becoming of itself, it is finite: it is *this* self, and not some other. Inasmuch as the self is derived, a possibility actualized from an infinite source of possibility, and retains that infinity within itself as the passionate inwardness of faith, then that self is infinite. But to reconcile existence and faith, that is, to be an existing individual who, in its finitude, can sustain itself in infinite faith, that is the paradox of existence, one which can only be lived but never overcome. As Kierkegaard puts it with characteristic irony: "to be in existence is always a somewhat embarrassing situation" (*CUP,* 404).

Let us return then to the sentence from *Sickness unto Death* which suggests that the Hegelian subject, reconceived as a self (with the capacity for inwardness), and understood as derived from an infinite source, is both self-constituting and derived, "a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another." This sentence, which appears logical and to some extent implicitly theological, leads to the introduction of despair as a psychological category:

> This is why there can be two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human self had established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself.
>
> (*SUD,* 14)

Despair is the result of the effort to overcome or solve the paradox of human existence. If one seeks to be grounded in the infinite and to deny that one exists and is, therefore, finite, one falls into the despair of the infinite, willing not to be the particular self that one is. But if one denies the infinite and seeks to take full responsibility for one's own existence, viewing all of one's self as one's own radical creation, that is the despair of the finite.[11] It is this second form of despair, the despair of willing to be oneself, that is, to be the ground or sole source of one's own existence, that is more fundamental than the first. This second form constitutes a refusal to be grounded in that which is more infinite than the human self and so constitutes a defiance of God. The primary way in which human selves fall into despair is through the repudiation of their infinite origins. This despair is marked by a certain hubris or arrogance and, at its limit, becomes demonic, understood as a willful defiance of the divine. We will consider that demonic extreme of despair toward the end of our remarks when we consider Kierkegaard's ambivalent relationship to his own authorship.

What this means, of course, is that if one knows one is in despair and seeks *by one's own means* to extricate oneself from despair, one will only become more fully steeped in that despair. That self is still trying to refuse its groundedness in that which is greater than itself. Paradoxically, the self that refuses the infinite must enact that refusal *infinitely*, thereby recapitulating and reaffirming the infinite in a negative way in the very gesture of disbelief. If Hegel thought that the subject might be a synthesis of finite and infinite, he failed to consider that that subject, reconceived as a self with inwardness, can never mediate the absolutely qualitative difference between what is finite in that self and what is infinite. This failure of mediation is what underscores the paradoxical character of existence; the passionate and nonrational affirmation of that paradox, an affirmation that must be infinitely repeated, *is faith;* the effort preemptively to resolve this paradox is the feat of despair. In this sense, despair marks the limit of dialectical mediation or, rather, every effort at mediation will be read by Kierkegaard as symptomatic of despair. Every synthesis presumes and institutes a *repudiation* of that which cannot be comprehended by thought; infinity is precisely that which eludes conceptualization. That refused infinity returns, however, as the infinite movement of despair in the existing individual who seeks to resolve the

paradox of existence through thought. Through the invocation of despair, Kierkegaard marks out the limits of the Hegelian ideal of synthesis: "Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself" (*SUD,* 15).

The Hegelian ideal of becoming at one with oneself is achieved through one's social relations and through one's relation to everything that is outside the self. For Hegel, the subject discovers that other human beings and objects are part of its own identity, that in *relating* to others and to objects, the human subject enacts (or actualizes) some of its own most fundamental capacities. Hence, the subject achieves a certain oneness with itself through relating to that which is different from itself. This oneness, however, is not a possibility for the Kierkegaardian self. As much as that self might want to affirm itself as the ground or origin of its own relations with others, it is bound to fail. This self can take responsibility for its own capacities by denying that it is itself produced by that which is greater than itself. That is one kind of despair, the despair of willing to be oneself. On the other hand, if that self tries to relinquish all responsibility for itself by claiming that some greater and infinite reality, God, has produced everything about that self, then that self is in a different kind of despair, the despair of willing not to be oneself. There is no escape from this paradox. Hence, to be a self means either to be in one of these two forms of despair or to have faith. But in both despair and faith, this paradox is never resolved. In despair, one lives one side of the paradox and then another (one takes radical responsibility for oneself or not at all), but in faith, one affirms the paradox, taking responsibility for oneself at the same time affirming that one is not the origin of one's existence.

One might ask, is one always either in despair or faith? The answer for Kierkegaard is yes. For the most part, human beings live in despair, and they do not even know that they are in despair. In fact, this not knowing that one is in despair is a symptom of despair. The person who does not know that there is a task, a struggle to affirm oneself in this paradoxical way, makes some set of presumptions about the solidity of its own existence which remain unquestioned and, hence, outside the difficulty of faith. And there appears to be no way to faith except through despair. But faith for Kierkegaard does not provide a solution for the paradox of the self. Indeed, nothing provides such a solution. The self is an alternation, a constant pitching to and fro, a lived paradox, and faith does not halt or resolve that alternation into a harmonious or synthetic whole; on the contrary, faith is precisely the affirmation that *there can be no resolution*. And insofar as 'synthesis' represents the rational resolution of the paradox, and the paradox cannot be resolved, then it follows that faith emerges precisely at the moment at which

'synthesis' shows itself to be a false solution. This is, as it were, Kierkegaard's last laugh on Hegel. Whereas Hegel argues that the failure of any given synthesis points the way to a greater and more inclusive synthesis, Kierkegaard tries to show that synthesis itself, no matter how inclusive, cannot resolve the paradox of the self. Concretely, this difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard implies that the self will ultimately have a very different experience of and in the world. For Hegel, the subject will eventually find a unified and harmonious relation with what appears at first to be outside itself, so that it can, ideally, find itself at home in the world, 'of ' the world that it is 'in.' But for Kierkegaard, that which is 'outside' the finite self, namely, the infinite, is also 'within' the self as freedom and the dual possibility of despair and faith (all of which are 'infinite' passions, passions that can have no end); further, the infinite that persists as the ground of the finite self or within the self as its own passion will never fully belong to the finite self or the finite world in which it nevertheless exists in some less than apparent way. Hence, for Kierkegaard, the infinity that is the source of the self and which persists in the self as its passion will never fully be 'of' the world in which it dwells. The self, for Kierkegaard, will be perpetually estranged not only from itself, but from its origins and from the world in which it finds itself.

One might imagine an Hegelian rejoinder to Kierkegaard's affirmation of the paradoxical self. Hegel might argue that if there is something in the self which is infinite, that infinity must nevertheless *appear* in some way in order to be *known*. In Hegelian language, one might say that for the infinite to become actual and, hence, knowable, it must become determinate or appear in some form. And Hegel imagined that certain kinds of concepts could be both finite (particular, determinate, specific) and infinite (nonspecific, indeterminate, unbounded). Hegel wanted to arrive at a concept, understood as a kind of speculative thought, in which the finite and the infinite would not only coexist, but be essentially dependent on one another. Imagine a thought which would be *your* thought, specifically yours, and therefore determined and specific, but which would *at the same time* be a thought of that which is infinite and, hence, not bound to you at all, indeed, not bounded or limited by anything. Hegel imagined that the thought of the infinite depends on the determinate thinker, the place and existence of that thinker, at the same time that that infinite thought exceeds that determinate place and thinker. In this sense, the infinite thought depends on the finite thinker in order to be thought, in order to have its occasion and its form; and the finite thinker is no thinker, that is, is not really thinking, thinking thought through to its infinite possibility, unless that finite thinker is able to think the infinite. Hence, for Hegel, a mutual dependency exists between that

which is finite and that which is infinite in the human subject, where both the finite and the infinite form the project of thinking.

Kierkegaard's rejoinder is firm. If one tries to *think* the infinite, one has *already* made the infinite finite. There can be no thinking of the infinite, for the infinite is precisely that not only which cannot be thought, but which insistently forces a crisis in thought itself; the infinite is the limit of thinking, and not a possible content of any thought. To the Hegelian claim that the infinite must first *appear* before it can be known, Kierkegaard would have to respond that the infinite can neither appear nor be known. Hence, it is to some extent *against* Hegel that Kierkegaard formulates his notion of the infinite and, therefore, also of faith: the infinite eludes the dialectic, the infinite cannot be grasped or 'Understood' by any rational effort of thought or synthesis. The infinite can be affirmed nonrationally and, hence, passionately, at the limits of thought, that is, at the limits of Hegelianism.

FEAR, TREMBLING, AND OTHER INWARD PASSIONS

This opposition to Hegel puts Kierkegaard in a bind, for Kierkegaard is *a writer,* he puts his opposition to Hegel into words, and he produces concrete and determinate texts, finite things, which house his claims about that which is infinite. How do we understand Kierkegaard, the finite man or 'existing individual,' in relation to this notion of the infinite that can never fully be expressed by any finite or determinate statement or text. As finite expressions, Kierkegaard's own texts, the *Sickness unto Death* itself or *Fear and Trembling* (1843), can only *fail* to express the very notion of infinity that they seek to communicate. Whereas an Hegelian might argue that Kierkegaard's writing of the infinite is itself essential to the infinite that it expresses, Kierkegaard's response will be that if there is an infinite that can never be resolved with the finite, then Kierkegaard's own texts will always *fail* to communicate the infinite. Indeed, Kierkegaard's response will be: 'My texts *must* fail to express the infinite, and it will be by virtue of that *failure* that the infinite will be affirmed. Moreover, that affirming of the infinite will not take the form of a thought; it will take place at the limits of thought itself; it will force a crisis in thought, the advent of passion.'

So, for Kierkegaard to set about to write a book against Hegel, against synthesis, and in favor of passion and faith, he must write a book that fails to communicate directly the very passion and faith he seeks to defend. An author cannot embody or express the infinite, for that 'expression' would

inadvertently render finite that which must remain infinite. Indeed, the words "passion" and "faith" cannot express or communicate passion and faith; they can only *fail* to communicate, and in failing, *point the way* to an affirmation that is fundamentally beyond language. Aware of this paradoxical task of trying to write about that which cannot be delivered in language, Kierkegaard insists upon the necessity of indirect communication, a kind of communication that knows its own limitations, and by enacting those limits, indirectly points the way to that which cannot be communicated.

Evidence of Kierkegaard's views on indirect communication can be found in the fact that he often wrote and published under a pseudonym. *Sickness unto Death* was published with "Anti-Climacus" as its author. *Fear and Trembling* was written by "Johannes de Silentio," and *Philosophical Fragments* by "Johannes Climacus," also the author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Other pseudonyms include "Constantin Constantius" (*Repetition,* 1843) and "Victor Eremita" (*Either/ Or,* 1843). The use of a pseudonym raises the question of who is the author behind the author? Why is Kierkegaard hiding? What is it that is concealed in this writing, and what is it that is revealed? Does the author mean to say what he says, or does the pseudonymous author allow the 'real' author to write what he would not write under his own name. What does it mean to write under the name of another? I do not want to suggest that pseudonymous authorship always works in the same way or for the same reasons in Kierkegaard's work. But it does seem directly related to the problem of writing the infinite that we mentioned above. The false name suggests that whatever is written under that name does not exhaust the full range of what the author, Kierkegaard, might be. Something is not being uttered or expressed or made known. Minimally, it is Kierkegaard the man who to some degree hides behind the fictional author under whose name he writes. On an existential level, however, there is something in every self which *cannot be expressed* by any act of writing. There is that in every self which is silent, and Kierkegaard is clear that in the end faith, and passion more generally, is not a matter of writing or speaking, but of remaining silent.

If Kierkegaard's texts, then, are to be works of faith, they must not only be a labor of language, but a labor of silence as well. This is suggested by the pseudonym "Johannes de Silentio," the 'author' of *Fear and Trembling.* And in that text, we encounter the figure of Abraham whose silence cannot be understood by the author. Indeed, Abraham stands for faith; he is called "a knight of faith," and yet he does not speak and leaves us no clues by which we might be able to find reason in his faith. The author tries repeatedly to understand Abraham's faith, but fails.

What is the story of Abraham, and what is the nature of Abraham's faith? Abraham receives a sign from God that he is to take his son to the top of a mountain, Mount Moriah, and there to slay his son as an act of faith. According to the Bible, Abraham does not tell Isaac, his son, what he is about to do, and neither does he tell Sarah, his wife. Through the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard opens *Fear and Trembling* by telling the story of Abraham several times. Each effort to narrate what happened with Abraham is also an effort to fathom how it is that Abraham could prepare himself to act in such a way. If Abraham were willing to slay his son, he risks becoming a murderer according to conventional ethical norms; he destroys his own son, his own family, breaking the most cherished of *human* bonds. Johannes de Silentio tries to fathom how it could be that Abraham, who loved his son, was nevertheless willing to defy, resist, or suspend that love as well as one of the most fundamental laws of ethics in order to perform his faith. What kind of faith has God exacted from Abraham such that he must prepare himself to sacrifice that worldly connection that is most important to him. Is this a cruel God, one to be disobeyed? And why does Abraham persist in his course, silently bringing Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah, and draw his hand only *then* to have his hand stayed by God?

The example is, of course, a shocking one, but Kierkegaard rehearses that scene of Abraham climbing Mount Moriah, drawing the sword, and he tries to understand how any human being could turn against that which is most important to him in the world. Abraham supplies no explanation, and Kierkegaard leads us to the point of understanding that there can be no explanation in words. In the name of what? For what higher good? For Johannes de Silentio, the answer never comes, but the questions repeat themselves insistently, exhausting language and opening out into the silent void of faith.

Kierkegaard imagines how it would be for Abraham to feel the full force of his love for Isaac and at the same time follow the dictate of a faith that requires the sacrifice of Isaac. This is surely a paradox, and in the story of Abraham we receive from Kierkegaard something like an allegory of the paradoxical self. There is no way to reconcile the profoundly finite and worldly love of a father for his son with a notion of faith which is infinite, 'in' the world but not 'of ' it. This is precisely the kind of paradox that cannot be thought, cannot be resolved into some harmonious solution, but which wrecks thought, forces an exposure of thought itself. In Kierkegaard's indirect words: "I cannot think myself into Abraham" (*FT*, 33); "For my part, I presumably can describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them" (*FT*, 37); "faith begins precisely where thought stops" (*FT*, 53).

But Kierkegaard is not only horrified by the sacrifice that faith has exacted from Abraham. He is also appalled by the fact that Abraham appears to get Isaac back, that God not only asks for a sacrifice, but returns what has been lost, and all this *without reason*. Furthermore, it appears that Abraham does not turn against the God who has, it seemed, played so cruelly with the most precious object of Abraham's human love:

> to be able to lose one's understanding and along with it everything finite, for which it is the stockbroker, and then to win the very same finitude again by virtue of the absurd—this appalls me, but that does not make me say it [faith] is something inferior, since, on the contrary, it is the one and only marvel.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard is appalled by the *arbitrariness* and whimsical character of the way in which God is figured here as giving and taking away. On the other hand, Abraham's faith is a marvel, since it does not waver in the face of the alternating beneficence and cruelty of this ultimate authority. Abraham is not shrewd with respect to God. Abraham does not figure that if he only acts as if he is willing to sacrifice Isaac, God will stay his hand: "he had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago" (*FT*, 36). If faith designates the limit of thought, if faith emerges precisely when thought fails to comprehend what is before it, then Abraham climbs the mountain and draws the sword *without knowing* that God will return Isaac to him. What is awesome in Abraham is that he sustains his faith *without knowing* that he will receive Isaac back. Faith is not a bargain; it is that affirmation that emerges when all bargaining has failed. This is what Kierkegaard means when he claims that Abraham has faith by virtue of the absurd. And if faith is a leap, it is a leap beyond thought, beyond calculation, a leap made from and with *passion* that can be neither comprehended by thought nor communicated through language.

In *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard claims that he cannot yet make this leap, but that he can only trace its steps and applaud that movement as a marvelous thing. He knows enough to recognize that Abraham must have been in anxiety at the moment in which he drew that sword. And whereas there are those who would defy God and return to the ethical world, refuse to draw the sword, and allay their anxiety in that way, Abraham is not one of them. And whereas there are those who would turn against their love for Isaac and deny the importance of that bond, Abraham is not one of them. He turns against neither the finite (Isaac) nor the infinite (God), but prepares for the paradoxical affirmation of both. In preparing to sacrifice Isaac, however, Abraham performs "the teleological suspension of the ethical" (*FT,* 54). This is not the denial of ethics, but the

suspension or post-ponement of the ethical domain in the name of that which is higher, namely, the infinite or the divine. The human and finite world is grounded in that which is larger than itself, namely, the infinite, and there are occasions in which the affirmation of that infinity takes priority over the affirmation of that finite and ethical domain which is the product of that infinity. But this suspension of the ethical entails anxiety, and faith does not resolve anxiety, but exists with it. Any finite individual can have faith only by contracting anxiety, for all faith involves some loss or weakening of worldly connections, including the worldly connection to one's own finite, bodily self. There is in faith a dying away of the finite self, this body, this name, these worldly connections to family, friends, lovers, this belonging to a time and a landscape, a home, a city. Faith underscores that all those finite things in which we are invested are perishable, and that there is no necessary reason or assurance that they will remain as we know them or survive at all.

If the story of Abraham is an allegory of faith, and if Abraham himself is a figure for faith, then we can read the story for its more general philosophical implications. Aristotle once claimed that philosophy begins with a sense of wonder, the wonder that there are things rather than no things. Aristotle's 'wonder' is not so different from Kierkegaard's sense of the marvelous in his encounter with Abraham's faith. For Aristotle, wonder emerges over the fact *that* there are things, not over *how* things came about—although that interested him, too—but that things came about at all. Kierkegaard writes of "the emotion which is the passionate sense for coming into existence: wonder" (*PF,* 99). In Kierkegaard's terms, it is, on the one hand, a marvel that these specific finite beings, humans, the elements, objects of all kinds, came into the world rather than some other set of beings. On the other hand, it is terrifying that all that exists appears to come into the world for no necessary reason at all. For if there is no necessary reason that things came into the world, there is no necessary reason that sustains those very things in the world, and there is no necessary reason that keeps those things from passing out of the finite world. If these finite beings came into the world from a set of infinite possibilities, then why is it that, of all the myriad and countless beings that came into the world, *these* came into being? There appears to be no necessity that *these* beings came into existence, and that others did not, if we consider that the source or origin of all things is infinite possibility, another name for God. But the wonder or marvel is provoked by another realization as well. If that which exists in the finite realm is the actualization of a set of possibilities, and this set of possibilities is only a subset of the infinite possibilities that are not actualized in the existing world, then how do we account for which possibilities made the *passage* from infinite possibility into that which exists in the finite world? No

reason can be supplied: there is no necessity for what exists to exist. In fact, not only is there no necessity for the infinite, God, to create the finite, the human world, but it is perfectly absurd that he did at all.

The finite is grounded in the infinite: we know this from Kierkegaard's analysis of despair. But the finite never fully expresses the infinite which is its origin. Precisely to the extent that an existing individual, for instance, is finite, that is, limited, mortal, located in space and time, and bodily, that individual is clearly not infinite and, hence, does not fully express the infinity out of which he or she (absurdly) arises. This passage from the infinite to the finite cannot be thought; it is wondrous and a marvel, but also quite terrifying, for there is no necessary reason for anything to exist or, for that matter, to persist in its existence, that is, to stay alive. Whatever God is for Kierkegaard, 'he' (Kierkegaard tends not to personify God) is not that which supplies a reason or a necessity for that which exists. On the contrary, the postulation of the Kierkegaardian God underscores that existence itself is absurd.

The story of Abraham suggests that whatever exists in this world does so by virtue of a kind of grace, an arbitrary and irrational act. Existence can be understood as a kind of unexpected gift, one which comes just as easily as it is taken away. To have faith means to affirm this contingency, this absurd coming-into-being of existence, regardless of the suffering that recognition of absurdity causes. To transform the terror produced by the recognition of existence in its absurdity is no easy task. Indeed, the aesthete and the ethicist cannot find relief from this terror; they are in despair to the extent that they are run by this terror and involved in sensuous or ethical endeavors which seek to quell the anxiety produced by the fact of human contingency. The Knight of Resignation in *Fear and Trembling* can be understood as a figure at the limit of the ethical domain, tracing the movements of faith, but not able to make the necessary leap. As a consequence, he is *horrified* by the prospect of Abraham's 'sacrifice' of his own son; indeed, the Knight of Infinite Resignation can understand Abraham's intended act as a murder—and not a sacrifice or offering to God.

We might then understand the movement from the ethical domain to that of faith as the transformation of terror into a sense of grace. The difficulty with making this movement, however, is that the prospect of losing one's worldly attachments, indeed, one's own finite existence for no necessary reason, is not easy to face with anything other than terror. Kierkegaard understood that the task of faith would be especially difficult to accomplish by those who lived according to the romantic impulse to invest existing individuals with such enormous value that they cannot imagine themselves continuing to exist in a world without them. This was the anguished predicament of the young man in *Repetition,* and there is good evidence to support the view that Kierkegaard himself felt just this

way about Regine Olsen with whom he broke off an engagement to be married. This broken engagement can be understood as Kierkegaard's own 'sacrifice' which, from an ethical point of view, appeared to be the emotional equivalent of murder.

In the midst of Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham's faith in *Fear and Trembling,* he remarks with due irony that if Hegel's philosophy were right, then Abraham would, indeed, be a murderer. For Kierkegaard, Hegel represents the ethical domain, for in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right,* he argues that the individual realizes his or her true and proper purpose in a community bound by *ethical* laws. Indeed, Hegel argues that if an individual holds him- or herself to be above the ethical law, that individual is sinful. Kierkegaard objects to Hegel's characterization of the assertion of individuality as sin. According to Kierkegaard, Hegel fails to understand that the individual is higher than the universal ethical norm, that there are times when ethical laws must be 'suspended' or 'surrendered' so that a higher value can be affirmed, namely, the value of faith—which, of course, for Kierkegaard, is always an *individual* affair. The relation to God cannot be mediated (this belief aligns Kierkegaard with Luther). Hegel would believe that God is present in the ethical law, and that individuals, by submitting to the ethical law, come into a mediated relationship to God. This happy reconciliation of the ethical (called 'the universal') and the religious (called 'the absolute') is one that Kierkegaard firmly rejects. The middle term, the ethical or 'universal,' which Hegel understands to mediate between the individual, on the one hand, and the divine, on the other, is, for Kierkegaard, precisely that which must be subordinated and suspended for the absolute and immediate relation of faith to take place between the individual and God: "this position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and as such remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought" (*FT, 56*).

In Kierkegaard's view, Hegel's ethical community requires the sacrifice of the individual to an anonymous law. As law-abiding citizens, we are interchangeable with one another; each of us expresses our true and proper self through the same acts by which we conform to a law which applies to all human beings regardless of our differences. In this sense, none of us are individuals before the law or, rather, each of us is treated by the law as an anonymous subject. Insofar as Abraham takes distance from the ethical law which prohibits murder, he becomes an individual, and the more he refuses to honor the authority of that law over his own existence, the more individuated he becomes. This act of putting into question the ethical law as a final authority over one's life engages Abraham in anxiety, for in questioning the law, Abraham encounters his own being apart from the ethical community in which he stands.

Opposing himself to Hegel's notion of individuality as sin, Kierkegaard values this anxiety as human freedom, the demand to make a decision whether or not to comply with the law or whether to follow a higher authority. Although Hegel appears to worry about such a moment in which the individual stands apart from the ethical community, suspending the power of its laws to govern his or her life, Hegel also appreciates fear and trembling as necessary moments in the development of the human subject.[12] Significantly, Kierkegaard does not acknowledge that moment in Hegel in which fear and trembling are considered to be necessary experiences in the acquisition of human freedom. We can find that moment at the end of Hegel's well-known chapter in the *Phenomenology* entitled "Lordship and Bondage." There the bondsman who has been the property of the lord has cut himself loose from his own enslavement. What we might expect is the jubilant celebration of freedom, but what we encounter in the emerging bondsman instead is a shattering fear. Consider the following description of the emancipated bondsman from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an example of the fear and trembling produced by the experience of human freedom temporarily untethered by authority. The bondsman labors on objects, and for the first time *recognizes* his own labor in that which he makes. In the recognition of *himself* in the object of his making, he is struck with fear:

> the formative activity…has the negative significance of *fear*. For, in fashioning the thing, the bondsman's own negativity [his freedom] becomes an object for him…this objective *negative* moment is none other than the allen being before which it has trembled.
>
> (*PS*, 118)[13]

Whereas the bondsman has been afraid of the lord, he is now frightened of his own freedom now that that freedom has become that which 'lords' over his own existence. A few lines later, Hegel continues with a passage that further links the expression of freedom through work with the experience of fear:

> Without the formative activity, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become explicitly *for itself*. If consciousness fashions the thing without that initial absolute fear, it is only an empty self-centred attitude…. If it has not experienced absolute fear but only some lesser dread, the negative being has remained for it something external [its freedom still appears to belong to another and is not yet its own], its substance has not been infected by it through and through.
>
> (*PS*, 119)

Hegel goes on to remark that if the bondsman has not been shaken by fear in the very fiber of its being, it will remain "a freedom enmeshed in servitude."

We can begin to see here that Kierkegaard's characterization of Hegel is not always fair. Hegel is clearly not in favor of the enslavement of the individual to the ethical law, for the fear and trembling associated with the moment of emancipation will inform the individual as he or she enters ethical life in the following chapter in the *Phenomenology.* Indeed, one might well ask the question of whether Kierkegaard's very language of "fear and trembling" is not derived from Hegel's description of the emerging bondsman in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. How far is the bondsman's trembling at the sight of his own freedom from Abraham's anxiety in the face of his own potential act? How do these 'tremblings' differ?

Whereas Hegel's bondsman trembles before that which he has created, the external confirmation of his own power to create, Abraham trembles (inwardly) before that which he is compelled by God to sacrifice and destroy. Whereas the bondsman is frightened of his own capacity to create, a capacity which in its apparent limitlessness makes the bondsman into a figure with enormous responsibility and power, Abraham is compelled to act according to a divine demand that he cannot understand. In this sense, Abraham's freedom is not guided by reason, but by that which is irrational, beyond reason, and which requires an obedience to that irrationality over any human law. The bondsman, on the other hand, appears to legislate a law for itself, expressed in its own 'formative activity' or labor. The bondsman appears to be temporarily without an authority, a 'lord,' who is other to himself. But Abraham, he is enthralled to a Lord who is so radically different from himself that he cannot understand him at all. That the bondsman is compelled to be free without the guidance of a supervening authority is an unbearable situation which leads to the development, in the following chapter on the "Unhappy consciousness," of a *conscience,* the self-imposition of an ethical law, what Hegel himself understands as a form of self-enslavement. Hence, Hegel's bondsman retreats from the fearful prospect of his own freedom through enslaving himself to ethical projects and practicing various rituals of self-denial. Abraham, on the other hand, must bind himself to an authority whose demands are incomprehensible, an act which leaves him frighteningly detached from the ethical community and from his own rational capacities. Kierkegaard tells us that it is through this persistence in fear and trembling that Abraham comes to the full and gracious experience of faith.

The task of faith is to continue to affirm infinite possibility in the face of events which appear to make existence itself a radically impossible

venture. What astonished Kierkegaard about the Abraham story is that Abraham faced the prospect of losing what was most precious to him in the world, and he still did not lose faith and curse God: he maintained his faith not only in the face of that loss, but in the face of having to make the sacrifice himself.[14] Abraham loves Isaac, but that human bond cannot be the most important passion of his life, for what merely exists can come and go, and that transience can never be the object of faith. If in the throes of romantic love or in the complicated emotional ties of family life, we say that our existence is meaningless without some existing individual, that is a symptom that we are in despair. For Kierkegaard, if any existing individual becomes the fundamental reason to live, that individual must be sacrificed so that faith can return to its proper object: the infinite.

In *Repetition,* published simultaneously with *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard relates the story of how a young man, a thinly veiled substitute for Kierkegaard himself, breaks off an engagement with a girl he loves. The sacrifice appears absurd, for he has not fallen out of love with her. And yet, if the girl has become the ultimate reason for living, the source of all affirmation, then the young man has transferred and invested the boundlessness of his passion onto an existing individual: this is, for Kierkegaard, a kind of despair and a failure of faith. Precisely because she has become an object he is not willing to lose, he must demonstrate his willingness to lose her altogether. His sacrifice is not unlike Abraham's, except that Abraham, being a "Knight of Faith," receives Isaac back again, whereas the young man, a veritable "Knight of Resignation," appears to orchestrate and suffer an irreversible loss. He knows how to sacrifice finite things, and to avoid the despair that characterizes the life of the aesthete as well as the ethicist, but he does not know how to affirm that infinity which appears to make existence utterly absurd.

What does it mean that whereas Abraham receives Isaac back, the young man in *Repetition* fails to have his love returned? To have faith means no longer to invest absolute meaning in what is finite, whether it is an individual person, a set of objects or possessions, a homeland, a job, a family. All of these sites of investment are finite and perishable, and when we transfer religious passion onto those things, according to Kierkegaard, we turn away from God and invest the things of this world with a displaced religious meaning and, hence, fall into despair. If one makes the leap of faith, then one invests absolute passion and meaning in the infinite; this entails a suspension not only of the ethical, but of the finite realm altogether, for any finite object of passion will now be understood as emerging as a gift from the infinite and passing back eventually into the infinite. For Kierkegaard, it is only once we affirm the transience and contingency (nonnecessity) of that which we love in this world that we are

free to love it at all. If Abraham gets Isaac back, it is because he has suspended his attachments to that which is finite, affirmed the infinite, and so understood that nothing that exists in this world can sustain an absolute passion. It is in this sense that Isaac was *always* a gift from God; one's own existence is a gift, and that of every other existing thing.

Of course, to recognize that there is no necessary reason that some beings exist and other possible beings do not produces not only a sense of wonder, but a sense of terror as well. The thought of an existing life as a contingency, as an arbitrary event which just as well *could not* have happened, or which could without reason pass away, this is a thought that, strictly speaking, cannot be maintained; it is a thought which founders on itself, for how can a thought think the contingency of the thinker who thinks it? But it is this thought that leads to the anxiety over existence that leads to the question of faith. To witness the existing world this way, as a terrifying and wondrous gift, is to know that one is not the author of that world, that the father, strictly speaking, is not the 'origin' of the son, and that not only do all things originate—absurdly, wondrously—in the infinite, but all existing things return there as well.

For Kierkegaard, this problem of the contingency of existence has implications for human love, a passion that verges on faith, but which becomes despair when it becomes too much like faith, an absolute or infinite passion. To love that which exists without at the same time knowing the fragile and contingent nature of existence is to be in despair; if one tries to love a human object as if it were absolute, one projects a religious passion onto a human object. The result, for Kierkegaard, is to become wracked with displaced passion and a constant sense of loss. Kierkegaard describes this problem at some length in the first volume of *Either/Or.* Considered to be part of Kierkegaard's early writings, *Either/Or* is composed of two volumes. The first offers writings that enact and explore the *aesthetic* point of view; the second volume offers sermons and treatises in the *ethical* point of view. Neither of these perspectives is the same as faith, but Kierkegaard, in unmistakenly Hegelian fashion, suggests that these two spheres, these two ways of approaching the world, have to be experienced in order to understand the limits of each and the superiority of faith. There is no writing in the perspective of faith in either of these volumes, but it is unclear that such a writing could exist; faith is nevertheless there in the writings as the path not chosen, the way to affirm the paradox that emerges between the aesthetic and ethical perspectives.

The vain effort to make of a human being an object of absolute and infinite passion is the fateful predicament of the aesthete in *Either/Or.* The alternative in that text is to become a purely *ethical* being, one who makes no attachments to anything finite, but acts in accordance with a universal law, a law that applies to everyone, and which makes of its obedient

subject an anonymous and impersonal subject. The aesthete, on the other hand, values what is most immediate and finite as if it were absolute; the ethical person (also termed the "Knight of Infinite Resignation") treats the human law as if it were absolute, and invests his or her full passion into the application of that law. The one in faith, however, lives fully in the finite world, but affirms its contingency at the same time. This is the marvel that Kierkegaard claims he cannot perform, to love that which exists and to affirm that it might be lost, that it cannot serve as the ultimate object of passion, that for which one lives. Human love requires the knowledge of grace, that what is given for us to love is not ours, and that its loss refers us to that which is the origin of all things finite, including ourselves. This means that for the one who has faith, love is always an anxious and ironic affair, and there is no way to see directly how that infinite faith in that which is infinite lives alongside the finite love of that which exists. In Kierkegaard's terms, "absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that the knight [of faith] can do it, and this is the one and only marvel" (*FT,* 41).

One implication of Kierkegaard's paradoxical view of faith is that it is *not* a form of asceticism. Kierkegaard does not advise a turning away from the finite world. On the contrary, he imagines that the Knight of Faith will be one who dwells among the ordinary world of things, a "tax collector" he suggests in *Fear and Trembling*. One would not be able to see from the outside that this individual has faith, for faith, by virtue of its radical inwardness, is inexpressible. The entirety of the finite realm would be 'returned' to such an individual for the paradoxical reason that, through faith, he or she no longer fears the loss of what exists; in faith, the individual affirms the absurdity and arbitrariness by which the existing world comes into being and passes out again. That affirmation is not a kind of wisdom or knowledge, but an irrational passion that emerges at the limits of all thinking.

THE PARADOXICAL LANGUAGE OF FAITH

Although it is clear that Kierkegaard writes in favor of faith, there are at least two remaining questions that trouble any reader of his works. The first question concerns the 'what' of faith: in what does Kierkegaard have faith? What is this God which appears to be the infinite or, more specifically, infinite possibility? The second question is intimately related to the first: how could we have received an answer to the question 'in what does Kierkegaard have faith?' if we expect the answer to arrive *in language*? After all, we have already learned that faith cannot be expressed in language, that it is the infinite passion of the inwardness of the self. But what is the status of Kierkegaard's own texts, if we understand the purpose of these texts to be an incitement to faith? How do these texts work? How do they achieve their purpose, if from the start we know that they can never express faith or, if they claim to have expressed faith, they have failed in that very task?

Kierkegaard's God is in-finite which means that this God can never be identified with one of his products. This God is said to be the origin of the existing world, but this is not a God who, in a personified form, at some point in history—or prior to history—said 'Let there be light' and light suddenly there was. And it is not that Kierkegaard disputes the truth of the Bible, but he insists that the truth of the Bible is not to be found in the language of the text. In this sense, Kierkegaard is against a literal reading of the Bible, one which takes every word printed there to be the transmitted word of God. On the contrary, the 'truth' of the Bible is not, properly speaking, *in* the text, but is to be found *in the reader,* in the various acts by which the various injunctions to faith are *appropriated* and taken up by those who read the text. The truth of the Bible is to be found in the faith of those who read the Bible. The text is a *condition* by which a certain kind of instruction in faith takes place, but faith can never be achieved by learning what the Bible says, only by finally turning away from that text and turning inward to discover the infinite passion that emerges from the demand to affirm contingency. In *Philosophical Fragments,* the Bible and biblical scholarship are treated with irony: these texts can deliver no *historical* truth of interest to the person interested in faith, for no historical documentation regarding the existence or teachings of Jesus Christ can ever convince a person into faith. Faith does not arrive as the result of a persuasive argument; faith (along with its alternative, despair) is precisely what has the chance to emerge when all argumentation and historical proof fail.[15]

But there is a further difficulty with an historical approach to faith. Some Christian scholars argue that it can be proven that Jesus Christ lived,

that he came into the world, and that he was the son of God. The proof 'that' he existed is, however, not enough for Kierkegaard. That assertion simply prompts him to ask a series of philosophical questions which the historical enquiry cannot answer: what does it mean for anything to 'come into existence'? If something can be said to 'come into existence,' then at some early point in time, it did not exist at all. How, then, can something which is nonbeing become transformed into being? This is, of course, the question that preoccupied us above when we considered how philosophical wonder focuses on the apparent absurdity that some things exist rather than not, that certain possibilities become actual or finite, whereas other possibilities remain merely possible. Possibility and actuality are mutually exclusive states, that is, a thing is either possible or actual, but it would make no sense to say that it is both at once. Therefore, to say that a given thing has come into existence implies that it has moved from a state of possibility to one of actuality. This transition cannot be 'thought,' says Kierkegaard, but is a contradiction, one that accompanies all 'coming into being.'

In *Philosophical Fragments,* Kierkegaard considers the highly significant paradox that in the person of the Savior (whose historical status remains uncertain or, at least, irrelevant), it appears that what is Eternal has come into time, and that what is infinite has appeared in finite form. Whereas Hegel would claim that the finite appearance in this consequential instance expresses and actualizes the infinite, that this person in time, aging and mortal, expressed that which can never die; Kierkegaard takes issue with such a notion, arguing that this occurrence is utterly paradoxical, that the human and divine aspects of the figure of Christ can never be reconciled; insofar as he is infinite, he cannot appear in finite form, without losing his status as infinite; and insofar as he is finite, he cannot become infinite, for finitude implies mortality.

What is striking about Kierkegaard's writing in *Philosophical Fragments* is that the so-called miracle of God coming into existence recurs at every moment that some finite thing 'comes into being.' Christ is no exception to this paradoxical movement, but neither is he singular. After all, every human self emerges from a set of infinite possibilities and so moves from the infinite (which is nonbeing, that which is not yet finite and does not yet have a specified kind of being) to the finite (or being). Indeed, anything that comes into existence is miraculous for the very reasons we set out above in our discussion of wonder. In making this move, Kierkegaard appears to be taking an almost arrogant distance from the church authorities, the Scriptures, and the religious authorities whose task it is to settle historical details about Christ's sojourn on earth. Indeed, Kierkegaard goes so far as to subject the key concepts of Christianity to a

new set of definitions, ones that are devised by him. Kierkegaard is not interested in testing his interprerations against the Bible or against earlier interpretations; he devises and sets forth his own. Throughout the introductory chapter of *Philosophical Fragments,* Kierkegaard appears to take over the power to name that properly belonged to God in the book of Genesis. In Genesis, God spoke and said, 'Let there be…light, man, woman, beasts, etc.,' and the very power of his voice was sufficient to bring these entities into being. Kierkegaard appears to appropriate this power of naming for himself, but the entities he brings into existence through his writings are Christian concepts. As a result, he *names* these concepts and, in the naming, revises their meaning according to his own inter-pretive scheme: "What now shall we call such a Teacher, who restores the lost condition and gives the learner the Truth? Let us call him *Saviour*…let us call him *Redeemer*" (*PF,* 21). Further definitions are offeredfor"conversion,""repentance,""NewBirth,"andmore (*PF,* 22–3).

What are we to make of this Kierkegaardian willingness to fabricate new meanings for the orthodox terms of Christianity? Is it not a kind of arrogance or pride to offer new interpretations for such words? By what right does Kierkegaard proceed with such obvious enthusiasm to create new meanings for old words? Is this creative way with words related to Kierkegaard's enigmatic career as an author?

What is the authority of the author? For Kierkegaard, faith cannot be communicated, so that any effort to write a book that communicates faith will, by definition, have to fail. In this way, then, Kierkegaard must write a book which constantly fails to communicate faith, a book which insistently renounces its own authority to state what faith is, a text which turns back upon itself and effectively wills its own failure. If the reader of his book knows that the book cannot offer knowledge of faith, then that reader will be seduced by the promise of that knowledge only to be disappointed in an instructive way. Kierkegaard's language must, then, perform the paradoxical task of enacting the limits of language itself. The author who wishes to point the way to faith must resist every effort to communicate faith directly; in other words, that author must will the failure of his own book, and in that very failure, know its success.

In *Sickness unto Death,* Kierkegaard considers the peculiar kind of despair that afflicts "poets" and makers of fiction. We can read in this diagnosis a thinly veiled autobiographical confession. Consider that Kierkegaard is a kind of poet,[16] one who produces a fictional narrator for most of his early texts through the construction of various pseudonyms. He then produces "examples" of faith and despair, fabricating "types" of individuals, embellishing on biblical and classical characters: Abraham, Don Juan, etc. And now consider Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the person

who suffers from defiant despair, the will to be oneself, that is, the will to be the sole ground and power of one's own existence and, therefore, to take the place of God:

> this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power…the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself.
>
> (*SUD,* 68)

Kierkegaard then explains that this kind of despairing individual regularly fantasizes that he or she is all kinds of things that they are not: "the self in despair…constantly relates to itself only by way of imaginary constructions" (*SUD,* 68). This fiction-producing self can make itself into "an imaginatively constructed God," but this self is for that reason "always building castles in the sky…only shadowboxing" (*SUD,* 69). At an extreme, this defiant form of despair becomes *demonic* despair, and here the will to fabricate and fictionalize asserts itself in clear defiance, even hatred, of God. Is there, for Kierkegaard, a stark opposition between the life of faith and that of fiction-making? And can Kierkegaard himself give up his imaginary constructions in order to live the life of faith, one which we know, from the consideration of Abraham, is a life of silence?

Demonic despair, which Kierkegaard calls the most intensive form of despair, is rooted in "a hatred of existence": "not even in defiance or defiantly does it will to be itself, but for spite" (*SUD,* 69). And what evidence does such a person have against existence? The one in demonic despair is himself the evidence that justifies his hatred of existence. This appears to imply that the one in demonic despair, that incessant maker of fictions, *hates himself* for producing an imaginary construction of himself, but nevertheless persists in this self-fabrication. This is a self which, through fiction-making, postures as the creator of its own existence, thus denying the place of God as the true author of human existence. But this demonic self must also despise itself for trying to take over the power of God. This self in demonic despair alternates between self-fabrication and self-hatred. Inasmuch as this demonic one is an author, and is Kierkegaard himself, he produces a fiction only then to tear down the construction he has just made. The one in demonic despair can acknowledge the divine authorship that enables his own fiction, his pseudonymous work, only by admitting that what he has produced is a necessary fraud.

At the end of Part One of *Sickness unto Death,* Kierkegaard appears to begin this disavowal of his own production, clearing the way for an

appreciation of God as the only 'first-rate author' in town, acknowledging that Kierkegaard's own work must always be under-stood as derived from the power that constitutes him, a power that precedes and enables his own imaginary production:

> Figuratively speaking, it is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production—and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author.
>
> (*SUD,* 74)

Written thus in 1848 and published in 1849, we can see here the fruition of Kierkegaard's intention to resist the seduction of authorship. Two years earlier, he wrote in his journal: "My idea is to give up being an author (which I can only be altogether or not at all) and prepare myself to be a pastor."[17] It appears that Kierkegaard gave up his career as a literary and philosophical author after *Sickness unto Death,* and persevered in writing purely religious tracts. Had he achieved faith? Did he overcome despair? Was his writing as compelling after the leap or did it turn out to require the very despair he sought to overcome?

NOTES

1 It would be interesting to compare this claim with Freud's efforts to address the question of 'anxiety' through analysis.
2 *SUD: Sickness unto Death,* ed. and trans. H.V.Hong and E.H.Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
3 "Hegel and Hegelianism constitute an essay in the comical." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. D.Swenson and W.Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), henceforth referred to as *CUP,* p. 34.
4 "In order to avoid confusion, it is at once necessary to recall that our treatment of the problem does not raise the question of the truth of Christianity. It merely deals with the problem of the individual's relationship to Christianity. It has nothing whatever to do with the systematic zeal of the personally indifferent individual to arrange the truths of Christianity in paragraphs; it deals with the concern of the infinitely interested individual for his own relationship to such a doctrine." Ibid., p. 18.
5 Descartes, Fifth Meditation. God is perfect and can only make that which is equally perfect or less perfect than him-/her-/itself, for nothing can be more perfect than God. If there is something which has some degree of perfection in it, that thing must be produced by that which is at least as perfect or more

perfect than the thing itself. There is nothing in the world that is more perfect than human beings even though human beings are imperfect in some ways (they sin, they are ignorant). This implies that human beings must be created by that which is equally or more perfect than themselves. And it is perfect being that is called God.

6 *FT: Fear and Trembling/Repetition,* ed. and trans. H.V.Hong and E.H.Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

7 See Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham, ibid.

8 *PF: Philosophical Fragments,* ed. N.Thulstrop, trans. D.Swenson and H.V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

9 "Commentator's introduction," *PF,* p. 1xxv.

10 See Kierkegaard's discussion of the limits of speculative thought in *CUP,* ch. 2, "The speculative point of view."

11 This is a view which is falsely attributed to existential philosophy generally, but which we can see ought not to be ascribed to Kierkegaard.

12 It is interesting to note that Kierkegaard takes the phrase "fear and trembling" from the New Testament, Philippians 2:12–14, but applies it to an Old Testament figure, Abraham. Hegel's placement of "fear and trembling" in relation to work is perhaps slightly closer to the meaning of the New Testament use: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." *The Dartmouth Bible,* ed. R.B.Chamberlin and H. Feldman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

13 PS: Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V.Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

14 Imagine if Hegel's bondsman were to have created a son with a woman, and that he was then compelled to sacrifice that son, how would Hegel's analysis have to change in order to take account of Abraham's anguish?

15 Note Kierkegaard's ironic tone in his writing against the historical efforts to supply a proof of God's existence: "And how does the God's existence emerge from the proof? Does it follow straightway, without any breach of continuity?...As long as I keep my hold on the proof, i.e. continue to demonstrate, the existence does not come out, if for no other reason than that I am engaged in proving it; but when I let the proof go, the existence is there. But this act of letting go is surely also something; it is indeed a contribution of mine. Must not this also be taken into account, this little moment, brief as it may be—it need not be long, for it is a *leap*. However brief this moment, if only an instantaneous now, this 'now' must be included in the reckoning." *PF,* p. 53.

Kierkegaard here plays on the double meaning of the act of letting go being "a contribution of mine." On the one hand, this is his philosophical contribution to the critique of rationalism, and "the leap" is a concept he introduced into philosophical and religious discourse. On the other hand, he is suggesting that no person, including himself, can arrive at faith without making a contribution of him- or herself. And this contribution, being one of passion, has to come from the inwardness of the self, and be directed toward a faith which no 'proof can automatically produce.

16 See L.Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

17 Quoted in the Introduction to *CUP,* p. xiii.

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