

PASSION FOR NOTHING: KIERKEGAARD'S APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

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ABBREVIATIONS

Kierkegaard's Danish Works

Pap. *Søren Kierkegaards Papier*. Eds. P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting. Gyldendal, 1909-1948.

Kierkegaard's English Works

CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert A. Anderson. Princeton University Press, 1980.

CD *Christian Discourses*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1997.

CI *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1989.

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1992.

EO *Either/Or*. Two vols. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1987.

EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1990.

FSE *For Self-Examination*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1990.

FTR *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1983.

PF *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1985.

JFY *Judge for Yourself!* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1990.

JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. 6 vols. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. University of Indiana Press, 1967-1978. The numbers listed in these references are journal entries rather than page numbers.

- PC *Practice in Christianity*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1991.
- PV *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Harper and Row, 1962.
- PWS *Prefaces and Writing Sampler*. Trans. Todd W. Nichol. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1988.
- SUD *The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1990.
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- WL *Works of Love*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1995.

In order to know God, your knowledge must change into unknowing, into a forgetting of yourself. – Meister Eckhart¹

Addressing itself to this *nothing*...adoration flashes as the signal of an absolute *outside*, of a *nihil* in which all nihilism loses its “-ism” (its supposed completion without further reference) in order to open infinitely onto a non-completion delivered from any horizon of accomplishment. Addressing itself, therefore, to this outside which cannot be said “as such.” – Jean-Luc Nancy²

¹ Eckhart, Sermon IV, in Pfeiffer, Franz, *Meister Eckhart* trans. C. de B. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 21.

² Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II* trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 74.

ATTUNEMENT

He does only one thing: he opens his arms. – Kierkegaard¹

KIERKEGAARD states that the culmination of his authorship is the “Discourses at the Communion on Fridays.” In the preface to a collection of such discourses he writes, “a gradually advancing author-activity that began with *Either/Or* seeks here its decisive point of rest at the foot of the altar.”² At the end of the authorship stands the abased Christ whose wounds gape open and whose arms spread agape before the believer, as do the arms of the statue of Christ that overlooks the altar in Our Lady’s Church in Copenhagen where Kierkegaard worshipped and took communion. In these final discourses, Kierkegaard writes, “language seemingly bursts and breaks in order to characterize God’s greatness in showing mercy.”³ The bursting and breaking of language is owing to the intensity of “longing” or “sorrow” [*Sorg*]⁴ that the eucharistic meal incites with the breaking of bread. The first of the communion discourses is based on Luke 22:15: “I have longed with all my heart to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Kierkegaard opens with a prayer that acknowledges to God, “longing is your gift.”⁵ He prays that “when longing grasps hold of us, oh, that we may also grasp hold of the longing; when it wants to carry us away, that we may also surrender ourselves.”⁶ To surrender to the longing that is the

¹ PC, 19. The following paragraphs were written in remembrance of the women with whom I shared communion in a Davidson County jail in Nashville, TN on Sunday evenings from 2012 to 2014.

² Kierkegaard, *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* trans. Sylvia Walsh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 125. In PV, Kierkegaard describes the movement of his authorship as proceeding “from the pseudonymous *Either/Or*, through *Concluding Postscript*, with my name as editor to *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*.” (5-6).

³ Kierkegaard, *Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*, 79.

⁴ CD, 251.

⁵ CD, 251.

⁶ CD, 251.

gift of God is to surrender to God, “because in the longing the eternal *is*, just as God *is* in the longing that is *for* him.”⁷

The eucharist does not mediate God objectively. It does not render God an object of knowledge. The eucharist—to use a term that will be central in this dissertation—“reduplicates” God subjectively, in and as longing. It repeats the wounded Christ, the Christ who longingly gapes open in the Spirit, singularizing believers before the shattering mercy of God. What matters here is not one’s knowledge of God but the longing to be known and loved unconditionally, to be seen and witnessed and heard in such way that one’s sin is not exposed and ridiculed but hidden away in a love that knows no judgment, a love that knows nothing. Such longing explodes or “bursts” all transactional accounts of sin, grace, atonement, repentance, confession, forgiveness, and eucharist. Objectively, sin is nothing for God. God demands or requires no placation, no appeasement, no public or private shaming, no accounting or explanation—*nothing*. God sees sin only subjectively, as the acid shame that bathes a disturbed soul who has sinned and been sinned against, a shame that pins the self to itself in crippling despair. God in Christ through the Spirit is the longing to release that shame into the quiet yet infinitely awake peace and joy of “self-forgetfulness.” That longing, which is a longing to be to be in touch with absolute kindness, *is* one’s “knowledge” of God, a knowledge that is no knowledge at all—it “affirms nothing”—but a movement of forgetting, a forgetting or release of oneself. Writing about the woman who anoints Jesus with her tears, Kierkegaard writes:

She affirms nothing, she acts: she weeps, she kisses his feet...she has nothing to do but weep...She sits weeping at Jesus’ feet. She has entirely forgotten about herself, forgotten every thought that might inwardly disturb her; she is quite still, as still as the sick child that is quieted at its mother’s breast where it cries itself out and forgets about itself...She has entirely forgotten herself, forgotten her surroundings with everything there that might have disturbed her, for, since they were almost designed to remind her in fearful and painful ways about who she was, it would be impossible to forget such surroundings if

⁷ CD, 260.

one did not forget oneself. But she weeps, and as she weeps she forgets herself. Oh, blessed tears of self-forgetfulness, such that as she weeps she is not even once reminded of what she is weeping about, so completely has she forgotten herself.⁸

This moment is everything for Kierkegaard, the moment of forgetting oneself, letting go of oneself before Christ. Everything Kierkegaard writes leads up to this. It is a profoundly apophatic moment that affirms nothing, that *affirms* nothing. Christ does not satisfy any desire for knowledge. Christ incites a desire, a passion, for nothing. He incites a longing or sorrow in which knowledge is infinitely *released*. In that longing, which is the heart's long surrender into grace, God *is*. God is the wound of sorrow for a self suffocated by identity, by the self's reduction to a known quality, such as "criminal," "good," "evil," "male," "female." By letting go of that suffocated, determined self, the self becomes nothing, nothing captured in knowledge, and so is given the freedom to become itself, a *self* rather than an identity. This is the gift of an immense power out of which one may rise up against a world overrun by violence, exploitation and an economy of misery and shame, apophatically declaring: *You cannot tell me who I am!* If Christianity is not opening onto this power, it is worthless: "So only that one went worthily to the Lord's table who went there with heartfelt longing and went from there with increased heartfelt longing."⁹

Kierkegaard's authorship in its concluding gesture opens onto an exorbitant, bottomless economy of gift. The more the gift is given, the more there is longing for the gift, for longing *is* the gift, is God as gift that will never exhaust or satisfy itself, holding itself eternally open in the face of a world that, bent on closure, blasphemes the Spirit.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings: A New Translation and Selection*. trans George Pattison (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 273.

⁹ CD, 261.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: NOTHING IS BETTER THAN SOMETHING

Only finitely is it true that something is better than nothing, where the infinite is concerned, the opposite holds—nothing is better than something. —Kierkegaard¹

i

The organizing claim of this dissertation is that Kierkegaard’s authorship is premised upon an apophatically conceived and enacted idea of God or the absolute. God is, for Kierkegaard, “absolutely different,”² and as such is unnamable and unknowable as any kind of object, radically withdrawn from conceptual delimitation: “God cannot be an object.”³ Crucially, this is owing not simply to the finitude of the human subject, but to the nature of the absolute itself, which Kierkegaard describes as “pure subjectivity”⁴ [*rene Subjectivitet*] and “infinite reduplication”⁵ [*uendelig Fordobelse*]. God eludes any position one could take up towards God, either in thought or in existence. God is beyond—or absolved of—determinate being. God remains an elusive “nothing,” and therefore thought and existence are marked by an ineradicable “passion,” the loss of grounding and finality that Kierkegaard equates with both “suffering” and “joy.”

The mark of this apophaticism, which I would suggest is the heart of Kierkegaard, is an ethical-religious radicality. The relation of the self to God is a bottomless opening, an open-ended movement of longing and passion that refuses closure. The apophatic here is essentially a

¹ JP, 4905

² PF, 44.

³ JP, 1349.

⁴ JP, 1449.

⁵ JP, 4571.

critique of closure and totality, totality as closure, in favor of an infinite *beginning* that holds itself in and repeats the instant of opening or birth. In the movement of faith, “one goes in a certain sense backward, toward the beginning...The beginning is this art of becoming silent.”⁶ “The absolute,” on these terms, does not name the dialectical production of the ideal meaning of reality, as in Hegel, in which any beginning is real only as the beginning of some determinate end or telos. Kierkegaard’s absolute names, rather, the absoluteness of *the silent beginning*, a beginning not aimed at any determinate end. In the instant of this silent beginning there is an abandonment of conceptual, teleological *meaning* and an opening onto what, following Jean-Luc Nancy, I might call the passion of *sense*, or the sense of passion, an infinite engagement with existence without teleology, without concept, without ground—in short, without why.

Two figures of this apophatic passion constantly recur in Kierkegaard’s authorship: the lover and the dancer, both figures of absolute movement, the movement of abandon that eludes any discursive capture. In the movement of this passion, “the passion of the infinite,”⁷ the self is split open in an instant of beginning by and before what cannot be named or appropriated by thought: “language breaks down, and thought is bewildered.”⁸ The apophatic in Kierkegaard is not primarily an epistemological or ontological problematic concerned with an unknowable object called “God.” It is an existential exigency, an infinite engagement with “the nothing that interlaces existence.”⁹ God, one could say, is nothing other than this: that this “nothing” does not reduce to a nihil-*ism* but is *lived* with abandon, with sorrowful longing and bewildered joy.

This dissertation will follow the apophatic in Kierkegaard into the existential enactments of “faith,” “hope,” and “love,” which are openings of the absolute in existence, the becoming

⁶ WA, 11.

⁷ CUP, 203.

⁸ EO 1, 230.

⁹ EO 1, 291.

absolute of existence. In Kierkegaard's hands, each of these is a movement of infinite reduplication, an absolute relation to the absolute: "And what, then, is it to be a self? It is to be a reduplication [*Fordoblelse*]." ¹⁰ Religious subjectivity, which is a "repetition" or "reduplication"—a "reduplicating repetition" [*fordoblende Gjentaelse*] ¹¹—of the infinity of divine subjectivity, is a movement of limitless relation and bottomless openness. What is always at issue "before God" is a negation that opens existence, absolutely: the "wound of negativity" ¹² that, by virtue of "the absolute's own resistance," ¹³ is held open without closure. Kierkegaard writes, "And my task is this: to proclaim what boundless reality every person has in himself ¹⁴ when before God he wills to become himself." ¹⁵

There is only one book length study that treats Kierkegaard explicitly as a negatively theological thinker, David Law's *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*. ¹⁶ While Law helpfully situates Kierkegaard's apophaticism in relation to its patristic and medieval precedents, arguing in fact that he is "more apophatic than the negative theologians themselves," Law does not discuss what I take to be Kierkegaard's negatively theological core, namely, infinite reduplication, which is

¹⁰ PC, 159.

¹¹ EUD, 169.

¹² CUP, 85.

¹³ CUP, 459.

¹⁴ In this dissertation, I have chosen to let Kierkegaard's gendered use of language, which typically renders both God and the human being in exclusively masculine terms, stand. I do not regard the move to change an author's pronouns on their behalf in order to reflect a more desirable gendered imaginary to be helpful. This move, it seems to me, simply passes over the problem; it does not engage it. Better to let the problem remain glaring in order to force engagement with the issue. The issue of gender in Kierkegaard is interesting and complex. His authorship performs both a patriarchal and heteronormative imaginary as well various kinds of possible openings beyond it. This dissertation will not engage the issue of gender directly, although I hope the path I take through Kierkegaard here sets the stage for such an engagement. My own reading of Kierkegaard resonates significantly with that of Alison Assister in her book *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015). With Assister, I find Kierkegaard's thought to be dominated by the moment of birth or beginning, and I would follow her in allowing this to upset or "unsay" any rigidified gender imaginary. Assister traces Kierkegaard's obsession with birth to Schelling; I want to trace it further back to Eckhart and even further to the female mystics who were Eckhart's teachers.

¹⁵ JP, 6917.

¹⁶ David Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the conceptual (un)ground of the articulation of both God and the self as “nothing.” This, it seems to me, is a significant limitation. He also distances Kierkegaard from Neoplatonic apophatic theologies, a move that needs qualification. Law attributes Kierkegaard’s apophaticism to an “existentialism”¹⁷ that is completely separate from any Neoplatonism, even if they share similar apophatic “results.” While it is true that Kierkegaard’s “existentialism” does have emphases that move along different trajectories than “an emphasis upon the One and the problem of multiplicity”¹⁸ traditionally understood, this is not the whole story. Let me unpack this in order to set up in more detail the trajectory of this dissertation.

ii

First, Neoplatonism cannot be reduced to the problem of the One and the many understood as a cosmological principle of procession and return. Meister Eckhart, for instance, who will be an important conversation partner in this dissertation, prioritizes inwardness or interiority as the site of relation between the soul and God, relativizing any focus on a cosmological scheme.

Kierkegaard belongs to this trajectory, one that extends from Eckhart through the Lutheran pietism that funds central currents of his thought.¹⁹ In Eckhart, Neoplatonism becomes a kind of existential apophaticism. The unknowable “One” becomes the principle-beyond-principle of a lived whyness, an errancy in the trajectory of existence that dislodges the self from the pursuit of determinate identities and goals. Eckhart calls this “becoming nothing” and living “without why.” Kierkegaard’s authorship repeats this gesture. The unknowable “One” becomes, for him, the source of an exigent call to live apophatically, in unknowing and risk, a call that is lived out in “that one” [*hiin Enkelte*], the single individual. Kierkegaard, too, calls this

¹⁷ Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, 206.

¹⁸ Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, 206.

¹⁹ See Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness* (Ashgate, 2013).

“becoming nothing,” an “absurd” movement that has “no ‘Why’ at all.”²⁰ On the religious stage, the unknowable oneness or singularity that is God “repeats” itself in the lived singularities of single individuals, rendering all of existence a field of apophatic elusiveness, split open beyond any determinable totality.

It is difficult to say what of Eckhart Kierkegaard might have read or encountered. Eckhart’s thought underwent a revival in the early nineteenth century through the Romantic movement, and it is somewhat curious that Kierkegaard, who comments on such a wide array of figures and topics, nowhere mentions him in his published works or his journals, even though Eckhartian tropes and even some quotes are splattered across his writings.²¹ What is clear is that Kierkegaard was influenced by a number of texts and authors that fall within a broad Eckhartian tradition. On the philosophical side, Eckhart was a formative influence on German idealism, Fichte and Hegel in particular, both central influences on Kierkegaard. In addition, Kierkegaard’s teacher—and nemesis—Hans Martensen, produced a study on Eckhart that Kierkegaard was most likely familiar with.²² On the religious side, the Eckhartian influence comes through Kierkegaard’s exposure to various pietist texts, texts “whose metaphysical horizon is entirely derived from the thought of Meister Eckhart,”²³ as David Kangas puts it. Such texts include the *Theologia Germanica*, *Die Nachfolung des armen Leben Jesu Christi* by pseudo-Tauler, Johann Arndt’s *Von warhem Christentum*, and Jacob Boehme’s *Der Weg zur*

²⁰ JP, 4901.

²¹ See EUD, 98. Kierkegaard here quotes Eckhart unacknowledged. It is in the silence surrounding Eckhart that one can perhaps hear something of the complicated and ambivalent nature of Kierkegaard’s relationship to idealism, which itself has a complicated and ambivalent relationship to mystical theology. As I will explore in a moment, those areas in idealism that appropriate mystical theology are the sites of Kierkegaard’s overlap with *and* critique of idealism. Eckhart stands at the heart of these junctures. For now, I simply want to hazard the claim that Eckhart’s influence on Kierkegaard (directly or indirectly) is as important as it is silent.

²² Martensen, Hans. “Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology,” trans. Curtis L. Thompson and David Kangas in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen’s Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²³ Kangas, David. *Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 9.

Christo, among others.²⁴ My aim in what follows is not to try to sort out the details of this influence. My aim is rather to show that Kierkegaard's theology can be read as a creative repetition of Eckhartian apophaticism. With Kierkegaard, I want to venture, mysticism becomes modern with the effect of breaking modernity open. What I offer in this dissertation can be read as a few explorations of this territory.²⁵

iii

I also want to contest Law's claim that Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel constitutes a "vigorous attack"²⁶ on Neoplatonic theology. This opens a complex set of issues that I cannot deal with fully here. But a few things can be said, specifically concerning the relations between Kierkegaard, idealism, and Neoplatonic apophaticism.

Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel is not a lobbing of bombs from an external standpoint, even if at times his rhetoric gives that impression. His critique does not stand in any kind of simple opposition or externality in relation to idealism. If it has any power, I would claim, it is because it is a gesture of what would come to be called "deconstruction"—a breaking open from the inside. The core of Kierkegaard's conceptual vocabulary is derived from idealism: spirit, moment, the absolute, immediacy, subjectivity, self-consciousness, reduplication, reflection,

²⁴ See Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, 9, as well as Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism, and Holiness*, ch. 3.

²⁵ For an account of Kierkegaard's exposure to Eckhart through the teaching and writing of Hans Martensen, see Curtis T. Thompson, *Following the Cultured Public's Chosen One: Why Martensen Mattered to Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2008), especially ch. 3. For a reading of Kierkegaardian faith as Eckhartian releasement, see David Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings*. Kangas is the only Kierkegaard scholar I know of who has given sustained attention to the apophatic, Eckhartian logic of "infinite reduplication." His work is a central inspiration and guide for this dissertation. See Kangas, "Absolute Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and the Question of Onto-Theo-Egology," *Philosophy Today*; Winter 2003; 47, 4; pp. 378-91. See also Kangas, "Kierkegaard, the Apophatic Theologian," *Enrahonar* 29, 1998, pp. 119-23. For a read of Kierkegaard as an apophatic theologian in relation to the problem of theodicy that also draws on Kangas, see Claudia Welz, *Love's Transcendence and the Problem of Theodicy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). For a read of Eckhart and deconstruction that makes reference to Kierkegaard, see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology After Ontotheology," *Modern Theology* 19:3 July 2003.

²⁶ Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, 206.

paradox, idea, becoming, etc.²⁷ His critical or deconstructive gesture is not to inhabit an external position outside of the metaphysics of idealism—which would simply allow it to stand—but to traverse its territory otherwise, redeploying its concepts in such a way so as to open within them an excess, an excess that is perhaps already present in idealism but is in various ways suppressed or under erasure.

For instance, Kierkegaard takes over from Fichte the idea that the truth that constitutes subjectivity is an infinite ethical striving. Johannes Climacus' slogan, "truth is subjectivity," which affirms that truth is found in an infinite willing that exceeds thinking, is essentially a Fichtean slogan. Fichte writes, "what I ought to become, and what I will be, exceeds all my thought."²⁸ For Fichte, however, this excess of striving is wholly within the bounds of a transcendental subjectivity that posits itself, indeed creates itself: "I will then be absolutely independent...the innermost spirit of my spirit is not an alien spirit but is simply produced by myself in the truest sense of the word. I am thoroughly my own creation."²⁹ Kierkegaard adopts Fichte's ethical apophaticism, but he in turn radicalizes it by locating its excess not within *a priori* transcendental subjectivity but within the relation to a transcendent absolute whose ethical-religious call, which is equally gift and task, strikes absolutely prior to any self-positing or self-choosing, simultaneously disrupting and founding the ethical subject, founding it as disrupted. This is the problematic at the heart of *Fear and Trembling*, the "teleological suspension of the ethical." Significantly, Fichte's notion of self-creation is itself a transformative appropriation of Eckhart's notion of self-birth, the birth of God in the soul, turning it from a

²⁷ See Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁸ Quoted in David W. Wood, "Fichte's Conception of Infinity in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*," in *Fichte's Vocation of Man: New Interpretive and Critical Essays*. eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014).

²⁹ Fichte, Johann. *Vocation of Man* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 73.

transcendent, paradoxical *event* into a transcendental structure.³⁰ Kierkegaard will turn the notion of self-willing back into a transcendent, paradoxical event, that is, back to its Eckhartian meaning.

Likewise, there is an excess within the Hegelian “movement” of reason. Reason, for Hegel, enacts a unity beyond the oppositional bifurcations that constitute “the understanding.” Hegel’s absolute is the speculative movement of reason that holds together oppositions in a unity that exceeds binaries, a unity that, for him, finds implicit affirmation in theologies of mystical union, such as Eckhart’s.³¹ The Hegelian movement toward unity, however, takes place on the level of “the concept,” a location that, for Kierkegaard, abstracts from lived existence and its excess of movement or becoming and the unity toward which it strives which is located on the level of ethical-religious willing. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does take over the Hegelian (and Kantian)³² idea that the movement of subjectivity exceeds “the understanding” [*Forstand*]. The passion of thought enacts the “downfall” of the understanding.³³ “Downfall” covers the same territory as “sublation,” but differently. Both name a movement of negation, a negation of the binaries that structure the understanding, which are themselves negations of absolute unity. The critical difference is that Kierkegaard locates the overcoming of understanding’s binaries in an “absolute paradox,” an unmediated coincidence of opposites that incites ethical-religious willing, rather than in a new, synthesized concept that opens further avenues for speculative thought. The former upholds the apophatic meaning of negation; the later erases it.

³⁰ See Ernst Von Bracken, *Meister Eckhart und Fichte* (Wurzburg: Konrad Triltsch, 1943). See also Katharina Cemig, *Mystic und Ethik bei Meister Eckhart und Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999).

³¹ Hegel, G.F.W. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*. ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193.

³² Already in Kant, the movement of reason drives past “the understanding” toward “the unconditioned.”

³³ PF, 37.

Kierkegaard's critical gesture vis-à-vis idealism, critique through re-appropriation, is the negative image of a gesture that idealism itself makes in relation to various theological conceptualities. This is what makes the Hegel-Kierkegaard standoff so interesting, and complicated. Both are trying to beat the other at the other's own game, Kierkegaard breaking philosophy open to religion, Hegel sublating religion into philosophy. Hegel, like Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, traverses theological territory and critically redeploys its concepts for his own purpose, finding in them an implicit affirmation of a reconciled or non-alienated relation between the finite and the infinite, i.e., the absolute. To carry through this reconciliation, Hegel negates any abstract or indeterminate infinite that would lie beyond or external to the determining movement of reason. It is here where Kierkegaard's protest will take place. He will reassert, in a repetition of Eckhartian apophaticism, the non-negatable indeterminability of the divine, the infinite as "nothing" rather than "something." Hegel *begins* with nothing and ends with determinate concepts produced by speculative reflection. Kierkegaard strives to *end* with nothing; he strives to break open the realm of the conceptual through a willing of or a becoming nothing that exceeds reflection: "The system begins with 'nothing'; the mystic always ends with 'nothing.' The latter is the divine nothing."³⁴

This is not, however, a simple or direct affirmation of an "outside" or a transcendence that establishes itself through its opposition to an "inside." For Kierkegaard, relation to the infinite, or the "divine nothing," takes place as an abyssal *inwardness* whose enactment does not take the metaphysical form of positing transcendence "out there." The outside, transcendence, *happens*, is an opening that happens, *right here* on the most intimate levels and folds of lived existence. Inwardness is where transcendence happens, where the outside is birthed into

³⁴ JP, 2797.

existence. Inwardness is a letting-in, a letting-happen, a making room, a throwing open, an abandon—in which “nothing” happens. “The one who loves discovers nothing,”³⁵ writes Kierkegaard. Love, the highest enactment of inwardness, inwardness as transcendence, is a movement that lets-in nothing for the sake of the other so that there might be room for the beloved, infinite room.

Such inwardness or interiority opens prior to subject-object duality, prior to any intentionality that consciousness could make in relation to reality, prior to the understanding *and* to reason, exposing consciousness to a negativity it cannot recuperate. Inwardness is where the self is nothing, knowing nothing, having nothing, being nothing. It is where the self touches and is touched by the absolute absolutely prior to any mediation by consciousness. Kierkegaard calls this absolute touching *Øieblikket*, the moment or instant. The irrecuperability of this eternal instant or moment, its falling always prior to consciousness as the event that opens consciousness to an absolute incommensurability at and as its heart, is the “nothing” that cannot be turned into something.

For Hegel, by contrast, reason can find its way to and occupy the position of an absolute beginning for which there is nothing prior. In this position lies the possibility of “the system,” a point of view that can speculatively recuperate all negativity into the movement of the concept and so articulate the essential unity within all difference. Kierkegaard, against Hegel, asserts *Øieblikket* as a beginning prior to any beginning consciousness can make, a beginning that subjectivity does not occupy and undertake but rather one that subjectivity must undergo or suffer as its constitutive moment. To allow all one’s own beginnings, including the beginning of thought, to become transparent to a beginning prior to all beginning is the movement of

³⁵ WL, 285.

“repetition”: “Oh, what a difficult beginning to existing or for coming to exist: to exist, then to come into existence in order first to exist.”³⁶ Consciousness is constitutively burdened by a perpetual, non-surpassable instant of beginning, a *being given*, a coming into existence, a being born, that it cannot be done with and that it cannot master. This ungrounding of the subject in its self-relation is the “transcendence” that Kierkegaard affirms against the immanence of Hegelian mediation.

iv

To speak of beginning is to speak of temporality. I want here to unpack a bit of Kierkegaard’s sense of temporality. It might not be immediately apparent how temporality relates to apophysis, but in Kierkegaard’s world they are intimately related. To sink into temporality, specifically into its openness before the eternal, is to undergo a being given, a gifting, that exceeds knowledge and representation.

At the heart of Kierkegaard’s break with Hegel, and idealism in general, is an un-mastering of temporality, an un-learning of time as grasped and represented in consciousness. Consciousness in some measure will always have eclipsed time as openness, as unknowable and non-calculable, in favor of time as represented, as recollected and anticipated. This is its ordinary “guilt.”³⁷ For Kierkegaard, temporality is timed not by transcendental subjectivity, as in Kant and Fichte, which becomes the unity of recollection and anticipation in Hegel, but by the

³⁶ CD, 39. This is the argument of Kierkegaard’s [Johannes Climacus’] text *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. The reason that doubt, which is a form of unknowing, is impossible to overcome on the level of reflection is because consciousness is always too late or too early in relation to reality. Consciousness will always already have eclipsed reality in order to represent it to itself. It is the site of a “collision” between reality and representation, meaning that consciousness is structurally constituted by the possibility of doubt, by the gap between the real and its “repetition” in consciousness. Because consciousness arrives with the advent of language, the possibility of pure self-presence is impossible. Language founds consciousness as split from itself within itself.

³⁷ Which is why in *Repetition* when Job comes to face to face with God he repents, even though he has nothing to repent of. Simply to take up a position vis-à-vis God, to bring God into the orbit of consciousness, is to become guilty, however subtly, of eclipsing God’s non-calculable otherness.

eternal, by the divine nothing, which is to say, by an immemorial past and an unanticipatable future. Temporality is an undergoing, the suffering of coming into existence, again and again, out of nowhere, toward nowhere—each day, each moment, each instant returning to a departure. Existential subjectivity is essentially vulnerable, exposed to the uncertainty of temporality, given to and infinitely tasked with itself beyond the possibility of forming itself as a determinate whole, always undone by the nothing of an instant by which it is given into existence. As soon as the self turns around to apprehend itself (faith will have unlearned this gesture) it will always have vanished from sight, given again into the future behind its own back. Every instant of existence, each of which is an “atom of eternity”³⁸ in time, is a re-launching of this being given in which eternity opens time forward, forming time’s limit or edge as a gaping opening. Religious subjectivity, which situates the self “at the edge of existence,”³⁹ in the tension or passion between time and eternity, consents absolutely to this opening, to the passion of being given ever again without knowledge.

Existence—the gaping open of time before the eternal—therefore makes self-identity, the possession of oneself in knowledge, impossible. Existence *just is* the interruption of totality, the slicing open, division, or “spacing” of subjectivity that “holds apart”⁴⁰ living and knowing. Eternity *is* this spacing, the limit of time that re-launches time off itself, like the beating or pulsing of rhythm in which every downbeat is simultaneously an interruption and re-launching of a song (or poem or dance) abandoned to its movement: “eternity is the true repetition.”⁴¹ The movement of repetition lets the outside of time into time, forming time’s own difference from itself, opening an infinite distancing within time that is traversable only with faith, hope, and

³⁸ CA, 88.

³⁹ CUP, 572.

⁴⁰ CUP, 118.

⁴¹ FTR, 133.

love, rather than knowledge. Eternity is this: that the present is exposed to its own groundlessness, that the present *opens*, that the future *comes*, not as an outgrowth of the past that one could anticipate, but with the suddenness of a surprise “which makes all things new.”⁴² The future is the outside of time opening within time: “the eternal first signifies the future...the future is the incognito in which the eternal, even though it is incommensurable with time, nevertheless preserves its association with time.”⁴³ Eternity re-launches time forwards: “repetition, by which eternity is entered forwards.”⁴⁴

For Kierkegaard, eternity is not a metaphysical concept that makes possible an account of what time “is.” Eternity is not the ideal meaning of time that is to be apprehended through recollection. Eternity is the “earnestness of existence.”⁴⁵ It (it is not an “it”) is that by virtue of which spirit or subjectivity beats and pulses forward, absolutely, obeying not any telos or immanent thrust but only the abandon of its being given, which is “the wonder,”⁴⁶ “the one and only marvel,”⁴⁷ the gift that will not become a possession. Eternity is the throwing open of time in which even the past will not have been simply what it was. One cannot apprehend the eternal under any conceptual determination, nor use the eternal as a principle of ideal meaning. The eternal is the loosening of all determinations, the beyond of time into which time must empty itself of its determinations. One can only *glimpse* the eternal as one undergoes the movement of time opening forward, *glance* at it as it departs from one’s sight, as it spaces the present out from itself, forming the present as an opening beyond closure or “conclusiveness.”⁴⁸

⁴² CA, 90.

⁴³ CA, 89.

⁴⁴ CA, 90.

⁴⁵ FTR, 133.

⁴⁶ FTR, 23.

⁴⁷ FTR, 41.

⁴⁸ CUP, 118.

This is the sense of *Øieblikket*, which literally means “the glance of the eye.” One might say that in *Øieblikket*, the eternal *winks* in time, “with the suddenness of the enigmatic,”⁴⁹ relating to and within time under the form of hiddenness or withdrawal, like a wink, releasing in time a spacing, an incommensurability, to which it is not a matter of being “bound”—one cannot be bound to nothing—but of being open. The instant constitutes time as a spacing, opening, and departure toward the absolute. *Øieblikket*: an absolute spacing, opening, and departure, charged with an infinite passion, a tension without intention, a repetition, a beating, a pulsing, a releasing, a flying forward, without goal.

This is why in *The Concept of Anxiety* Vigilius Haufniensis (literally, “watchman of the harbor,” one who glimpses or glances at the opening onto the sea) depicts the timing of temporality by the eternal through the image of a lover watching, glimpsing, her beloved depart in his ship over the horizon.⁵⁰ Through this departure or withdrawal, the present opens for the lover as the impossibility of possession, an interruption of direct immediacy and continuity that re-launches subjectivity as an infinite longing charged with a tension and spacing stretched out by the open sea, traversable only with a patience that waits upon the unknowable future, for an unanticipatable return or repetition. Exposure to the instant interrupts and empties time as a medium of knowing, being, and having. This is also why Johannes de Silentio, when straining to catch a glimpse of Abraham as he departs over the horizon toward Mt. Moriah, where he undergoes the interruption and re-launching of his relation to Isaac, experiences the suspension of consciousness and the blanking out of vision: “My brain reels...I almost faint,”⁵¹ “everything goes black before my eyes.”⁵²

⁴⁹ CA, 30.

⁵⁰ CA, 87.

⁵¹ FTR, 47.

⁵² *Fear and Trembling* trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40.

Within the opening of inwardness, the event of being given into time by eternity, which is the movement of religiousness, the self does not relate to the “divine nothing” as an object that it could apprehend or as a principle that it could put to speculative use. The self rather *becomes nothing* through a repetition or reduplication, what Kierkegaard will also call an “appropriation,” of the divine nothing, of the self’s abyssal origin, which is also its absolute future. Suspended between an abyssal origin and an absolute future in the instant of its coming into existence, the self is nothing, nothing in itself, nothing that is not already ungrounded off itself, continually interrupted and re-launched. It has nowhere to stand still—“in the life of spirit there is no standing still”⁵³—no ground beneath its feet, no place to be something. This being-always-in-between, being-on-the-way, is the self’s exposure to existence, the exposure that *is* existence. Existence, for Kierkegaard, is an exit, an ecstasy, an exit from self-identity and self-possession by way of the instant of being given. Existence is passage, movement, becoming, departure, birth, not as represented in consciousness, however, which would be a reduction to immanence, but as *lived*, with an openness beyond knowing, which is “the earnestness of existence.”

For this reason, where a transcendental production of temporality might be spoken of, as in Kant, Kierkegaard speaks instead of an apophatic and kenotic breaking open of temporality, namely, *patience*.⁵⁴ Patience abides in a beginning that does not anticipate its own end. It lets time be beyond representation, lets it gape open without concept or conclusion by virtue of the eternal. Patience suffers the openness of time that opens the self beyond itself. It undergoes time beyond calculation, waiting upon the timing or repetition of the eternal, the divine nothing, whose moment strikes always in an instant, eluding anticipation and recollection.

⁵³ SUD, 94.

⁵⁴ I will unpack this in chapter five through a reading of Kierkegaard’s discourses, “To Gain One’s Soul in Patience” and “Patience in Expectancy.”

This perpetual, repeated beginning or being given places God or the infinite infinitely close to the self, but also infinitely beyond mastery, neither inside nor outside, displaced from any determinate place. This is a kind of transcendent immanence, or immanent transcendence. It is again a repetition of Eckhart, of what Ernst von Bracken calls Eckhart's "transcendentizing inwardness," a letting-in and so giving birth to what cannot be mastered—existence in its openness, or what is the same, existence as a gift that will never become a possession. To be ceaselessly given a gift that one will never come to possess, one's life in time, is for both Eckhart and Kierkegaard, an irremediable suffering, a passion, that coincides with, that *is*, a bottomless joy.

v

Gathering these threads, let me articulate differently than Law an account of Kierkegaard's relation to Neoplatonism as it pertains to his critique of Hegel. One could trace the movement of his critique in the following way: Hegel "sublates" Neoplatonic mystical theology into his system, but he does so only by putting its apophaticism under "erasure," as Cyril O'Regan puts it.⁵⁵ Hegel declared his full agreement with Eckhart's famous line: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees himself. My eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love."⁵⁶ But whereas, for Eckhart, this is a profoundly apophatic affirmation of the oneness of God and the soul in the hidden ground of the self in which the soul gazes at the divine withdrawal or wink, for Hegel, this is an affirmation of absolute seeing or knowing, of the possibility of glimpsing reality from the standpoint of an absolute beginning that

⁵⁵ Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (New York: State University of New York, 1994), 43.

⁵⁶ O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel*, 250. The quote as it comes to Hegel (or as he alters it?) is slightly different than the original Eckhart quote. For Eckhart, the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees "me," rather than "himself." The shift from first to third person is indicative of the shift from the spiritual or existential to the speculative that occurs in Hegel.

anticipates its absolute end. The oneness of God's eye and the mind's eye is, for Hegel, the ability of reason to enact the absolute, to arrive at the unity of identity and difference as the all-embracing totality of spirit. It signals the fundamental determinability and thus knowability of reality, including God, and therefore an immanence in relation to which there is no outside. Hegel empties out the silence and indetermination of the One, making it speak as the dialectical history of spirit. He "mediates" identity and difference, the One and the many, arriving at the identity of identity and difference. The One *is* the many as such, the many in-and-for-itself, unfolding as an all-embracing whole that holds together and articulates all difference within itself.

Kierkegaard, as I've said, stands not outside of but within this nexus. He adopts the idealism of Hegel's turn from apprehending the real as substance to apprehending it as subject or spirit, a turn that has its precedents in Eckhart, Böhme, Kant, Fichte, and Schelling. Spirit or subjectivity, in distinction from substance, is the *act* of relating itself to itself. Kierkegaard, therefore, also affirms the identity of identity and difference. Spirit or subjectivity, for him, is the active relating of itself to itself, opening difference (i.e. negation) as that across which any identity is enacted. Moreover, with Hegel and the idealists (and Eckhart), Kierkegaard affirms that human subjectivity is where the absolute occurs, where it "comes into existence," where the finite is synthesized with and so "sees" the infinite in the glance of the eye.

The crucial difference is that Kierkegaard conceives of this act of synthesis as a movement of "repetition" or "reduplication" rather than "mediation," a wink rather than a steady gaze, a non-recuperable instant rather than an achieved concept. This produces a different account of the relation between identity and difference, one in which their identity cannot be represented, externalized, or articulated—synthesized—because the difference to be traversed

between the self and itself is not an *immanent* difference within *being*. It is the *absolute* or non-determinable difference that is God, a difference that is seen or glimpsed only in its withdrawal from all determinable difference, a difference that is *nothing* and so, objectively, no difference at all. This withdrawal of the divine from objectivity is not a “going away” but an absolute coming near, a coming near beyond the binary of presence/absence, a coming alongside, a being “with-” that “-draws” the self into an intimacy with itself as nothing, an intimacy that spaces the self out from itself, infinitely. Between the self and its repetition is an absolute negation, an absolute expenditure without return, or an expenditure that returns to and “repeats” its own expenditure.

For Kierkegaard, this is the structure of “freedom,” the capacity to let go of and give oneself, absolutely, which is the capacity to *wait*, to be patient, to abide in a beginning without anticipatable or determinable end. To dispossess oneself in this way, which simultaneously to gain oneself infinitely, is to let the eternal interrupt and halt all of one’s projects, re-launching one beyond the realm of projects and projections. Such freedom is a “dying to the world,”⁵⁷ a dying to the anxious need to be or accomplish something in the world, a becoming nothing. This negation leaves identity always gaping open, never closed or accomplished, and therefore never identity. The self becoming or reduplicating itself across time cannot, therefore, be represented directly in thought or in speech. It can only be *lived* as inwardness, as an inwardness more inward than self-presence, so inward that it cannot come to speech: “Abraham *cannot* speak.”⁵⁸ Identity becomes *singularity* in Kierkegaard, the self split off from totality by being split open by the absolute, unspeakable difference that is God.

This opening of the self onto absolute difference erases Hegel’s erasure, reopening the apophatic motifs that Hegel sought to overcome, in particular the apophatic economy of the

⁵⁷ SUD, 6.

⁵⁸ FTR, 115.

inward relation between the soul and God that is prior to any subject-object relation. Kierkegaard both adopts and reverses the Hegelian problematic of spirit, which itself adopts and reverses Neoplatonic mysticism. By reversing a reversal, or negating a negation, he turns the problematic of spirit into a negatively theological dialectic, repeating the negativity of Hegelian dialectic against itself in order to break it open to absolute difference, to abyssal inwardness.

It is crucial to register that inwardness or interiority, so very central for Kierkegaard, is not self-presence, self-possession, or the site of identity. Interiority is the sight of an exposure to what cannot be possessed or brought to presence. With Kierkegaard, one has to think the *exteriority of interiority*, that is, interiority as an exposure to an abyss, an exposure that goes “all the way down,” as it were, and all the way in. Interiority is where the self wraps itself around an infinite opening, a movement that is simultaneously the self’s undoing and its birth, its birth as nothing, an absolute splitting open. As David Kangas puts it, “The most interior is what is not possessed, but rather what dispossesses. Interiority, then, is not a foundation for the constitution of the real, but non-foundation, groundlessness. The preeminent—most originary and singular—tasks of the subject arise in the relation to its own groundlessness.”⁵⁹ Inwardness is the site of a “breakthrough”⁶⁰ into groundlessness through which the self is dispossessed from itself and, one might say, its onto-theological will, its will to render reality calculable through the positing of grounds. The ground of the self is the groundlessness of the “divine nothing,” which Kierkegaard evokes with his metaphor of the self treading water out over “70,000 fathoms.” This does not place Kierkegaard outside of Neoplatonic mystical theology but within something like an Eckhartian version of it.

vi

⁵⁹ Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, 197.

⁶⁰ FTR, 69

The central conceptual nexus to clarify in Kierkegaard's repetition of Eckhartian apophaticism is "reduplication." I will devote chapter three to its exposition. What I want to clarify here initially is how reduplication is a principle of indetermination, one that is not, however, simply opposed to determination in any kind of static sense. Indetermination understood as reduplication is an un-determin-*ing*. It is an opening of determination that releases a dispossession within determination—a freedom—that does not allow it ever to arrive at any final sense or security of meaning, or at any final sense or security of un-meaning, a nihil-ism.

In Eckhart's theology, this dialectic between determination and indetermination is found in the way he dialectically relates God's tri-unity and unity, or God and the Godhead. The Godhead is sheer, indeterminate unity or oneness that is radically "beyond" the determinate life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At times, Eckhart's rhetoric can even give the impression that God's oneness is severed from God's threeness.⁶¹ I follow Bernard McGinn, however, in finding a thoroughly paradoxical relation between God's oneness and threeness in Eckhart. What the Trinity reveals is what remains unrevealable, the absolute oneness of God that cannot be named or conceptualized. It is not a matter of choosing between oneness and threeness, or between revelation and hiddenness, or determination and indetermination. These poles are paradoxically simultaneous and amplified in relation to each other. Eckhart writes, "Distinction comes from the Absolute Unity, that is, the distinction in the Trinity. Absolute Unity *is* the distinction and distinction *is* the Unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the Unity, for that is the distinction without distinction."⁶² This means that the trinitarian determination of God is also an

⁶¹ "But as he is simply one, without any manner and properties, he is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, and yet he is a something that is neither this nor that." Eckhart, Meister. *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. Trans. and introduction by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn (Paulist, 1981), 181. Hereafter ME.

⁶² ME, 36.

indetermination, one in which all determinations are kept open and fluid, without closure or fixity, flowing from and toward a oneness without name or concept. The Trinity determines God as indeterminate. It reveals God as hidden. It opens an empty center, a nothingness, an absolute “with-” that “–draws,” that sketches with abandon, creating “without why.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together enact an apophatic excess within which the soul (and God) is given birth.

The indeterminate oneness of God, then, precisely as the source and excess of God’s tri-unity, is not without relation or movement, even as it cannot be identified with any determinate relation or movement. It is limitless relation and movement. It is here where the principle of reduplication becomes central. The Godhead, for Eckhart, is not a static or rigid unity, making even “one” an improper name or concept, but a dynamic uniting that occurs as a reduplication or reflection of itself into itself. He writes:

Note that the repetition (*reduplicatio*) [of the divine name] (namely that it says ‘I am who I am’) points to the purity of affirmation excluding all negation from God. It also indicates a reflexive turning back of its existence into and upon itself and its dwelling and remaining fixed in itself. It further indicates a ‘boiling’ or giving birth to itself—glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself...everywhere turned back and reflected upon itself.⁶³

As the movement that constitutes the Godhead, reduplication is a movement of self-affirmation that excludes all negation, that is, all determination that falls outside of—is not—the purity of self-affirmation that inheres in and reverts into itself. It is a negation of negation (but not in the Hegelian sense of a “sublating” of negation). Such indeterminate purity of self-affirmation, an affirmation that doesn’t affirm anything determinate, an affirmation of no-thing, an affirmation of affirmation, like water (an indeterminate medium) boiling into itself, is the unity of God’s tri-unity. This means, as I’ve said, that God’s determinate, revelatory movement as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is fluid or excessive. It is ordered not toward a fixing of objective revelatory content

⁶³ Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 46.

but toward the purely reduplicated and therefore indeterminate divine self-affirmation from which and toward which all determination flows. The inward “boiling” (*bullitio*) of the Godhead is the principle of God’s trinitarian relations, of their “melting” into each other, as well as of their “overflow” or “birth” (*ebullitio*) into creation. God boils and births creation within the divine life, the divine life that, in creating, with-draws. Creatures are given to themselves within the divine with-drawal, not in order to reach an entelechy, a finished form, but in order to desire themselves, one might say, as sketches, as transparencies drawn open to nothing but the instant of their birth. This opens an open-ended, unfinishable economy of relation between creator and creature, a movement of life and affirmation absent of or free in relation to determinate ends or goals. In God, the creature undergoes its own (and God’s) reduplication or reversion into itself as nothing, which is a becoming open to nothing but birth, a being born—*Gottesburt*.

Accordingly, the existential thrust of Eckhart’s theology drives toward whylessness. God’s life has no immanent *use*, either speculatively or existentially. That is its transcendence. This is why giving birth to God in one’s soul, breaking through into the Godhead, which is simultaneously a letting oneself be born, is a breaking open to a life “without why.” Such a life wills the good in a reduplicated way, in and for itself, withdrawn from and so unsettling any economy of determinate results, speculative projects, projected futures, or calculated moralities. It wills the good sheerly in the moment as a movement of joyful wandering. Eckhart writes:

But if someone asks a good man: ‘Why do you love God?’—‘I do not know, because of God.’—‘Why do you love the truth?’—‘Because of the truth.’—‘Why do you love justice?’—‘Because of justice.’—‘Why do you love goodness?’—‘Because of goodness.’—‘Why are you living?’—‘My word, I do not know! But I am happy to be alive.’⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Eckhart, quoted in Shurmann, Reiner. *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy* (Lindisfarne Books: Great Barrington, 2001) xii.

A person who breaks through into the Godhead, as Reiner Shurmann puts it, “no longer has a place to establish himself. He has settled on the road, and for those who have learned how to listen, his existence becomes a call. This errant one dwells in joy. Through his wanderings the origin beckons.”⁶⁵ In Eckhart, the Neoplatonic One becomes a call to an existential apophysis, a wandering. The One: that the origin with-draws, releasing forward, sketching, an open road.

My claim is that when Kierkegaard speaks of God as “infinite reduplication” a similar apophatic open-endedness or whylessness is being affirmed. Kierkegaard also speaks of God as “unconditioned, being in and for itself,” which I will also unpack in chapter three. This is another way of naming the pure—unconditioned—self-reversion or repetition that constitutes the divine or absolute as “nothing,” nothing determinate, nothing but an infinite intimacy with and longing for its own nothingness that in the instant of creation becomes an infinite roominess for and intimacy with creatures. Kierkegaard here brings himself into structural similarity with Eckhart’s Neoplatonic apophaticism of the One, the unity-in-reduplication that constitutes the Godhead. Accordingly, the existential thrust of Kierkegaard’s theology also drives toward whylessness, a whylessness that is an “offense” to the understanding that seeks reasons and grounds. Why should a person venture or let go of everything for the sake of the absolute, that is, die to the world, the world structured by projects and calculations? Kierkegaard answers, “Well, there is no ‘why’; so it is indeed lunacy, says the understanding. There is no ‘why,’ because there is an infinite ‘why.’ But where the understanding comes to a standstill in this way, there is the possibility of offense. If there is to be any triumphant breakthrough, there must be faith.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Shurmann, *Wandering Joy*, 206.

⁶⁶ PC, 120.

Moreover, Kierkegaard, like Eckhart, construes the “breakthrough” of faith as a breaking through into joy, the whyless joy of the moment of birth, “the blissful security of the moment,”⁶⁷ the joy of the lilies and the birds who live only for today, rather than the calculated joy of a project that has the care and worry of tomorrow. Willing the latter, “perhaps one becomes something great in the world, scores extraordinary success, is honored and praised by one’s contemporaries as the greatest man of the age, etc.”⁶⁸ Whyless willing, by contrast, dislodges one from the movement of becoming something, the movement toward identity, and therefore it incites the offense of the world. “The infinite loftiness of living for the absolute is expressed by becoming scum in the world, an object of mockery and disdain...in whom the world sees a criminal,”⁶⁹ that is, an “errant one,” in Shurmann’s language. For Kierkegaard and Eckhart, a whyless, offensive joy that abides even in suffering, even through the loss of outward recognition, place, and identity, is the lunacy of apophatic faith.

In Kierkegaard, too, I am claiming, the Neoplatonic One becomes a lived whylessness, an existential apophysis, a joyful excess at the heart of willing. Purity of heart is to will “one” thing, namely, the good reduplicated into itself and so withdrawn from external reasons or justifications, from result-oriented willing that Kierkegaard calls “double-mindedness.” The good has no “why,” no telos beyond itself. The good is the good only in relation to itself. To will the good for fear of punishment, out of desire for reward or success, to be seen as a good person, to enforce a morality, to protect an institution, etc., is precisely not to will the good. This is to will the good *and* some determinate end, which is to negate the good. The good is beyond good and evil, beyond the determinate distinctions through which the understanding represents the

⁶⁷ FTR, 132.

⁶⁸ PC, 120.

⁶⁹ PC, 120.

good to itself.⁷⁰ The good excludes or negates all such negations, for Kierkegaard. The good is pure, limitless affirmation, an apophatic, utterly free Yes! uttered in inwardness.⁷¹

I want to claim, therefore, that Kierkegaard's emphasis on the single individual alone before God, which is not, it should be emphasized, an asocial individualism, is a reinscription of an unspeakable, unknowable "One," "that one" [*hiin Enkelte*], withdrawn from objective attachment and determination, in Kierkegaard's case from "the system" and "the crowd." Kierkegaard does, like Hegel (and both are dependent here on Christian transformations of Neoplatonism), affirm the One only through an affirmation of multiplicity or difference. Each self, as *that one*, is a singular (non-identical) repetition of *the One*. But unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard does not sublimate this multiplicity into an *articulable* unity or totality, the unity of the concept or the totality of the system or a determinate ethical community. The unity that unities all multiplicity, all singularities, cannot be said. In *Works of Love*, this is the unity of absolute equality, the absoluteness of equality, of being-with the neighbor. As absolute, this equality, which is our sharing and loving our absolute spacing from each other, is unsayable. Absolute equality—and Kierkegaard is clear in *Works of Love* that God *simply is* the principle of absolute equality, of "like for like"—is neither enforceable nor identifiable with anything objective. Its

⁷⁰ Simone Weil puts this well: "When we consent to something which we represent to ourselves as the good, we consent to a mixture of good and evil, and this consent produces good and evil: the proportion of good and evil in us does not change. On the other hand the unconditional consent to that good which we are not able and never will be able to represent to ourselves—such consent is pure good and produces only good, moreover, it is enough that it should continue for the whole soul to be nothing but good in the end." "He Whom We Must Love Is Absent," in *On What Cannot Be Said: Volume 1: Classic Formulations* ed. William Franke (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 206.

⁷¹ One of the striking things about Kierkegaard's long discourse, "Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing," is that he never defines the good, even though he spends well over 100 pages discussing how to will it. The only determination that Kierkegaard gives to the good is that it is "one" (26). The good is, one might say, precisely *how* one wills it. The good is the movement of reduplication itself. This places the good "beyond being" in the Neoplatonic, apophatic sense. Kierkegaard's distinctiveness is to let this beyond open in the intimacy of the heart's relation to itself.

trace is written in the command to love: you shall love the neighbor, whoever, whatever, however, whenever, wherever they are.

Kierkegaard therefore lets “that one,” each one, be. He does not demand that the neighbor speak and articulate its identity within any determinate social idiom, such as politics, or even the church. He hears a different demand or duty with regard to the neighbor, the demand to let them be, to let them remain the secret, the singularity, the ever-renewed becoming that they are, and in that letting be, that hospitality, to love, which is to will the good. The gift of the singular neighbor, “that one,” each one, every one, is prior to any subject-object framework into which they might be translated, prior to any identity, prior to any determinate social belonging. Prior to any determinate belonging is a belonging to nothing, the divine nothing, which is why the highest willing of oneself (and the neighbor) is not the will to belong to “the crowd” but the longing for one’s (and the neighbor’s) being-given, for the instant of birth that precedes and exceeds identity. All translation of the self into an articulable identity must therefore fall backward, or forward, into silence. If there is recognition in love, it is an apophatic recognition. To love is to let the neighbor live without telling them who they are or where they belong. It is to let oneself live without being told who one is by “the others.” The good, the gift: to let the self be its silent, never finished movement, its longing, to let love become the love of secrets, to unhand the self before God where it may rest joyfully and freely in its becoming.

vii

Let me say a bit more about what I mean by an “existential apophasis” or apophatic willing, which will be fleshed out in the chapters on faith, hope, and love. Two things are central here, both of which come to Kierkegaard from the Eckhartian tradition: 1) An affirmation of the real not as being or presence but as the *gift* or *birth* of presence, an affirmation made in Eckhart’s

Gottesburt, the birth of God in the soul, and repeated in Kierkegaard's *Øieblikket*, the instant. This is an affirmation of reality in terms of event, a coming into existence by virtue of an instant prior to all presence, an instant that on the horizon of presence is "nothing." 2) Undergoing or "appropriating" this instant, this birth or being-given, which is always only appropriated as in-appropriable, is the movement of releasement or letting-go: *Gelassenheit*, in Eckhartian terms, "faith," in Kierkegaardian terms.

By conceiving of God as pure subjectivity and infinite reduplication, an infinite reduplication of subjectivity, Kierkegaard repeats a central move of Neoplatonic apophatic theologies that I have already begun to trace: he removes the cause or principle of existence from the order of determinate being leaving existence "ungrounded" before what can only be described and related to as "nothing," "the nothing that interlaces existence."⁷² This move goes back to Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius and extends through Eckhart and Nicholas Cusanus and beyond.⁷³ Eckhart speaks of God as pure intellect that is absolutely absolved of determinate being, a pure openness, attention, and intimacy without determination. The birth of God in the soul, therefore, which is the enactment of inwardness, is the event of *Gelassenheit*, the letting go of being and the will to determine and a sinking into nothing. "Releasement" is apophatic willing.

Kierkegaard repeats this gesture when he speaks of God as pure subjectivity that "has nothing of objective being."⁷⁴ This leads him to speak of faith as an "absolute sinking"⁷⁵ and a

⁷² EO 1, 291.

⁷³ On this, see William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), ch. 4

⁷⁴ JP, 1449

⁷⁵ CA, 158.

“letting go”⁷⁶ through which “the existence of God...emerges.”⁷⁷ God comes into existence, is birthed, only through and for faith, but not as some-thing that the intellect grasps, neither this nor that. God comes into existence as nothing, nothing objective, as pure subjectivity, as the longing of and for birth. God is the very event of releasement, a letting go that releases the opening, the beginning, the instant of coming into existence. In the instant of faith, which corresponds to the Neoplatonic and Eckhartian instant of “breakthrough,” divine subjectivity is not mediated through any objective positivity. The instant of faith reduplicates or repeats divine subjectivity as “an infinite negative resolution, [a letting go of all objective being], which is the individuality’s infinite form of God’s being within him.”⁷⁸ Becoming a self before God means becoming a releasement from being, a nothing, a nothin-*ing*, an apophatic becoming, alive only on the pure freedom and longing that is the breath of God. To live into this freedom is to “sink into one’s own nothingness,”⁷⁹ which is to sink into the moment of birth that is prior to presence, the moment that births presence. In the bewilderment of this moment one is nothing but a reduplicated instant of birth. One is set in motion absolutely, apophatically, withdrawn and withdrawing from objective identity, place, and position. “The more pure a person is, the more he approaches inability to be an object to others persons.”⁸⁰ The self before God flies and leaps and dances into existence.

This freedom that is God comes into existence not through positive exertion or forceful intrusion, but only through a letting go, through a letting-in of an inappropriable opening that is a

⁷⁶ PF, 43.

⁷⁷ PF, 43. Cf. CUP, 138: “In fables and fairy tales there is a lamp, which is called ‘magical’; when it is rubbed, then the spirit (of the lamp) appears. An amusement. But freedom, it is the (true) magic lamp; when a person rubs it with ethical passion: then God comes into existence for him.” See also JP, 2 p. 565-6, the note on “God”: “If an existing person does not have faith, then God neither *is* nor is God *present*, although understood eternally God nevertheless eternally is.”

⁷⁸ CUP, 35.

⁷⁹ EUD, 305.

⁸⁰ JP, 1349.

dislodging of the knowing, willing subject. God and self are always mutually implicated events in Kierkegaard, as they are in Eckhart, meaning that neither God nor the self ever objectively “is.” God does not exist as an immanent object or ground for the knowing subject: “God does not exist, he is eternal.”⁸¹ Neither does the self exist as an immanent being that as such is analogically related to transcendent Being: “There is no immanental underlying kinship between the temporal and the eternal.”⁸² God and self *come into* existence together as an ethical-religious event that is “let be” by the self that becomes *nothing*. This is why Abraham, for Johannes de Silentio, “conquered God by his powerlessness.”⁸³

One can give this paradoxical statement an Eckhartian reading.⁸⁴ God beyond any objective “God” of human willing and conception is, as it were, “let be” by powerlessness, repeated into existence through the movement of releasement. Kierkegaard writes, “It is self-renunciation which discovers that God is.”⁸⁵ Such renunciation lets go of the “self” that holds “God” calculatively (ontologically) in place and is itself held in place by “God.” The instant one lets go of this “self” and its will to ground itself and the “God” that is the result of this will, “God” is conquered and one is free of “God,” and God beyond “God,” God as God, is given birth, as the very joy and power of the self’s releasement. “The one who will work,” writes Johannes de Silentio, “gives birth to his own father.”⁸⁶ Faith is the work of giving oneself one’s own divine origin as a work of letting go of oneself as origin, releasing oneself into an absolute origin or beginning that is one’s eternal being given into time and existence. Faith gives the self

⁸¹ CUP, 332.

⁸² CUP, 573.

⁸³ FTR, 16.

⁸⁴ Cf. Eckhart, Sermon 22: “If a man humbles himself, God cannot withhold his own goodness but must come down and flow into the humble man, and to him who is least of all he gives himself the most of all, and he gives himself to him completely.” ME, 195.

⁸⁵ WL, 362.

⁸⁶ FTR, 27.

its being given. Faith is a repetition of the self's being given, a letting-be of God's letting-be. This is a precise Eckhartian paradox. Eckhart writes, "Out of the purity he everlastingly bore me, his only-born Son, into that same image of his eternal Fatherhood, that I may be Father and give birth to him of who I am born...God acts like that: He gives birth to his Only-Begotten Son...into me, so I give him birth again into the Father."⁸⁷

This is an articulation of the self as an *event* of origination, a *coming into* existence, a *birth* to presence that is its own condition of possibility—a "miracle."⁸⁸ In the working of faith, the self sinks into its nothingness where it abides in the instant of its birth out of nothing. "Work," here, because it is the work of sinking into one's giftedness, becomes "play,"⁸⁹ a letting go into existence as gift. This transforms all of life into a "joyful surprise" full of "wonder"⁹⁰ rather than a calculated advance or despairing resignation. Faith relates to existence neither as grounded in an eternal presence that one "recollects" nor as set adrift on "a vast, never appeased emptiness,"⁹¹ but as the gift or letting be of presence that one "repeats" by letting oneself be given into time as an event of freedom that leaves one "astonished,"⁹² in awe that one is here, alive, living, breathing, even though one is nothing. Faith, then, lets go even of letting go, which could become a subtle gesture of mastery, a resignation or flight from existence. Letting go *absolutely* is a "double movement" or repetition through which one lets oneself be given into time and existence passionately as a "boundless reality."⁹³ The "only possible hindrance" to this boundless joy "is a person when he himself wants to be something" rather than "nothing"⁹⁴: "If,

⁸⁷ ME, 194-5.

⁸⁸ FTR, 37.

⁸⁹ FTR, 122.

⁹⁰ EUD, 226

⁹¹ FTR, 15.

⁹² EUD, 226.

⁹³ JP, 6917

⁹⁴ EUD, 226.

however, a person knew how to make himself truly what he truly is—nothing—knew how to set the seal of patience on what he had understood—ah, then his life, whether he is the greatest or the lowliest, would even today be a joyful surprise.”⁹⁵

viii

I would locate the difference between Kierkegaard’s apophaticism and certain Neoplatonic apophaticisms in the different locations and trajectories of apophatic ecstasy or breakthrough into what is beyond knowledge. The breakthrough into the One, for Plotinus, is an ecstasy that launches one out of time and out of the body. The breakthrough into “that one,” for Kierkegaard, is a breakthrough into one-self as an ecstatic movement into time and therefore into and through the body. This is why Kierkegaard prefers dancing metaphors: leaps, movements, and positions. It is why thought, for him, is not motionless contemplation, but “walking”⁹⁶—quite literally walking, Kierkegaard loved to walk!⁹⁷ Becoming nothing is not the cessation of worldly passion and engagement, but, as I’ve said, the condition for an infinite engagement beyond posited, teleological grounds: “to become nothing before God, and nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ EUD, 226.

⁹⁶ PF, 37.

⁹⁷ In a letter to his sister-in-law that accompanied the copy of *Works of Love* he sent to her, Kierkegaard writes: “Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it. Even if one were to walk for one’s health and it were constantly one station ahead—I would still say: Walk! Besides, it is also apparent that in walking one constantly gets as close to well-being as possible, even if one does not quite reach it—but by sitting still, and the more one sits still, the closer one comes to feeling ill. Health and salvation can be found only in motion.” WL, 474-5.

⁹⁸ JFY, 106. This is also the case for Eckhart. As Reiner Schurmann puts it: “In Eckhart there is no appeal to a privileged experience, no regret of falling back into the body after a repose in the divine, and above all no opposition between a higher world and a lower world into which the soul is resigned to redescend. If in his comprehension of time Eckhart is indebted to Neoplatonic mysticism, he modifies its meaning throughout, moving away from an ‘ecstatic’ comprehension to a ‘worldly’ comprehension of the instant: flight from the present situation turns into a way of being with it.” *Wandering Joy*, 15.

The distinctiveness of Kierkegaard's apophaticism lies in his treatment of God's non-objectivity as an ethical-religious exigency rather than as an isolated epistemological or ontological problematic. Apophasis is an existential, spiritual task, an education into "the silent and voracious eloquence of action."⁹⁹ Forerunners to Kierkegaard in this regard, besides Eckhart, are various figures from mystical and pietist traditions, such as Marguerite Porete, Teresa of Avilla, John of the Cross, and Jakob Böhme, among others. Kierkegaard adopts the tropes of "becoming nothing" and "inner annihilation" that operate centrally in these authors as apophatic, ethical-religious orientations to life. And although Kierkegaard does not explicitly adopt the theme of mystical union, something like mystical union is operative in his thought, especially when the language of "becoming nothing" emerges. Human subjectivity and divine subjectivity sink into each other at the point where both are nothing. Kierkegaard writes:

Whom should the struggler desire to resemble other than God? But if he himself is something or wants to be something, this something is sufficient to hinder the resemblance. Only when he himself becomes nothing, only then can God illuminate him so that he resembles God. However great he is, he cannot manifest God's likeness; God can imprint himself in him only when he himself has become nothing. When the ocean is exerting all its power, that is precisely the time when it cannot reflect the image of heaven, and even the slightest motion blurs the image; but when it becomes still and deep, then the image of heaven sinks into its nothingness.¹⁰⁰

Particularly striking in this regard are the resonances between Porete's "sea of joy" and Kierkegaard's "70,000 fathoms of water." Both are metaphors for an abyss of indetermination that opens an insane, dangerous joy: "Where is the right place [to be joyful]?" asks Kierkegaard. "It is—in danger. To be joyful out on 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many miles from all human help—yes, that is something great!"¹⁰¹ For Porete and Kierkegaard, to live before God as

⁹⁹ PC, 14.

¹⁰⁰ EUD, 399.

¹⁰¹ SLW, 470.

nothing, which is to live “in”¹⁰² God, is to undergo the joyful liquidation of objective identity and purpose and become the joy of coming into existence upon an open sea of possibility. Porete says “farewell” to ecclesial virtues insofar as they are positive, determinate pathways to identity and recognition. The nothingness of her liquid joy is better to her than who she could become if she submitted to ecclesial authority and regimen, an authority and regimen that ended up putting her to death for refusing to recant her farewell.¹⁰³ Echoing Porete, Kierkegaard also dethrones virtue: “this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.”¹⁰⁴ Those who cling to their own capability “swim in the shallows in the company of waders.” This “is not the religious.”¹⁰⁵ Faith swims out in the deep where even virtues are liquidated.

One of my intentions in the following chapters is to explore how, in Kierkegaard’s hands, the traditional theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—break from the discourses of habit, capability, and recognition, which are all discourses of determination, of the self as something. Faith, hope, and love, for Kierkegaard, are not immanent teleological orientations toward a socially mediated good, nor does the willing subject acquire them as self-possessioned capabilities. Decision for the good always takes place in some measure “alone” without the determination of “the others,” and moral and ethical capability are always in some measure too late with regard to the difficulty of existence, which puts one “out on the ‘70,000 fathoms deep,’ before one learns to be able.”¹⁰⁶ Learning faith, hope, and love is a matter of abiding before God in “the continual understanding that I am able to do nothing at all.”¹⁰⁷ This is a consent to a disability, a

¹⁰² CD, 40.

¹⁰³ See Kangas, “Dangerous Joy: Marguerite Porete’s Good-bye to the Virtues,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 1, Number 93, July 2011, pp. 299-321.

¹⁰⁴ SUD, 82.

¹⁰⁵ SLW, 470.

¹⁰⁶ WL, 363.

¹⁰⁷ WL, 363.

nothingness, that is a constitutive, and not merely contingent, feature of being a self: “And it is difficult to understand this, [that I am able to do nothing at all], to understand it not at the moment when one actually is unable to do anything, when one is sick, in low spirits, but to understand it at the moment when one seemingly is capable of doing everything.”¹⁰⁸ To will one’s own nothingness in all one’s willing, willing even the nothingness of one’s own willing, is to release oneself into God in whom one is “able to do everything.”¹⁰⁹ Here complete disability and complete ability coincide, which is a “contradiction in blessedness and terror.”¹¹⁰ Willing nothing is a lived coincidence of opposites that unities “strenuousness” with something “quite easy.”¹¹¹ There is nothing harder, and nothing easier, than letting go. “The difficulty, therefore, is just that I am to work together with God, if not in any other way, then through the continual understanding that I am able to do nothing at all.”¹¹²

Also particularly striking with regard to the letting go of capability are the resonances between John of the Cross’ “dark night of the spirit” and Kierkegaard’s meditations on despair, spiritual trial, and God as unconditioned darkness.¹¹³ Consider the following passage from Kierkegaard:

By nature human beings dread walking in the dark—no wonder, then, that they by nature dread the unconditioned, getting involved with the unconditioned, of which it holds true that no night and 'no darkness is half so black' as this darkness and this night in which all relative goals...in which all considerations (the lights we generally use to help ourselves), in which even the most sensitive and warmest feelings of devotion—are extinguished, for otherwise it is not unconditionally the unconditioned...Only when every ‘Why’ vanishes in the night of the unconditioned and becomes silent in the silence of the unconditioned,

¹⁰⁸ WL, 363.

¹⁰⁹ WL, 362.

¹¹⁰ WL, 362.

¹¹¹ WL, 362-3.

¹¹² WL, 363.

¹¹³ See Simon D. Podmore’s books, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), and *Struggling with God: Kierkegaard and the Temptation of Spiritual Trial* (James Clarke & Co., 2013).

only then can a person venture everything...In the unconditioned all teleology vanishes...¹¹⁴

As with John of the Cross and other mystics, the journey into God involves the dispossession and frustration of plans, expectations, representations, and even the warmest of religious feelings. One must let go of anything and everything one might be tempted to hang on to, including one's virtue. This is not, however, a plunge into nihilism or a hatred of life. It is, as I've already mentioned, the opening of a relation to life beyond posited, teleological grounds. The "non-experience" of relating to God as darkness is the pathway out of our "natural" expectations, ideas, and ideological positionings of God, ourselves, and each other, and so the beginning of a freedom and transformation of desire that "turns everything upside down"¹¹⁵ in a limitless affirmation that endures all things, hopes all things, believes all things, and is never put to shame. The darkness, negativity, and non-objectivity of God does not take one out of the world or put one in an apathetic or stoic relationship to life. It opens a different way of being in and with the world, dead to the world insofar as it is dead to itself in self-consuming despair, but supremely alive to God's action in the world and so alive to the world as an arena of gift, mercy, and novelty. God's action and presence is undergone as a kind of darkness, a "wound of negativity" that cannot be conscripted into any human project, plan, or aspiration, and this is exactly why it is freeing. The movements of faith, hope, and love are, for Kierkegaard, "appropriations" of this negativity, an appropriation of what always remains inappropriable, rendering human existence an expropriation unto God, a releasement or letting go that provocatively trusts that with God all things are possible, that nothing is finished, that God is the negation of every closure and the

¹¹⁴ JP, 4908, 4901.

¹¹⁵ EUD, 300.

giver of infinite beginnings. The apophatic in Kierkegaard is located here, where existence is held open before the supreme difficulty of learning this trust, which is a learning of silence.

ix

Kierkegaard's christology, which is an affirmation of "absolute paradox," an unmediated coincidence of opposites, gathers and intensifies all of these threads. I will offering a reading of a few of his christological texts in the following chapters, showing that his christology is apophatic. Divine revelation in Christ does not supply determinate knowledge. God's unknowability is not negatable. Unknowability is not primarily a function of the internal limits of the knowing subject but a function of God's absoluteness. Revelation, rather than overcoming hiddenness through the giving of knowledge, is the revelation of *hiddenness*: "God manifests himself; this is known by the fact that God hides himself."¹¹⁶ "In Christ everything is revealed—and *everything is hidden*."¹¹⁷ Revelation occasions the *release* of knowledge through which one unknows both God and oneself and so relates to God as God and to the self as self, to both as nothing. Christ is the opening in history of God's absoluteness, an opening that occasions not determinate knowing but an ever-deepening passion or longing that expresses itself in unhanded action not identifiable with any determinate project, outcome, or success. Kierkegaard's emphasis on "imitation" and the "contemporaneity" of Christ, rather than on knowledge of Christ, configures christology in an apophatic key. Before Christ, one is given to act in ways that release knowledge and embrace risk and uncertainty. Christology is the site of an apophysis of action, where action, as *absolute* action, action as abandon, has "no 'Why' at all."¹¹⁸

x

¹¹⁶ Pap. X3 A 626.

¹¹⁷ JP, 2397.

¹¹⁸ JP, 4901.

Before going on to explore in more detail the logic (or beyond logic) of infinite reduplication and pure subjectivity, and the virtues (or beyond virtues) of faith, hope, and love, I want in chapter two to turn my attention to Kierkegaard as a writer, specifically to his authorship as a performance of “indirect communication.” My aim is to draw out the apophatic logic of indirection as one that is intimately related to the apophatic logic of reduplication. Kierkegaard’s writing is reduplicated discourse. Its “what,” its content, is reduplicated or reflected through its “how,” its form. There is, therefore, never any finalized or objective “what.” Form is content. Or Kierkegaard’s forms open discourse beyond the production of scientific content, beyond results, conclusions, or any objectivity on which it could find support. The stylistic passion and elusiveness with which Kierkegaard writes is not adventitious fancy. Nor is it subordinate to a more measured and manageable objectivity. The style of the authorship has everything to do with how one communicates what cannot be said, which is its burning passion.

CHAPTER II

INDIRECT COMMUNICATION: WRITING NOTHING

This plurality of voices, pens, positions, and literary jokers—which are also present in the most philosophical parts of the work (the *Fragments* and *Postscript*)—necessitates a never resting attentiveness on the part of the reader. The reader must have a dual view, which not only grasps *what* Kierkegaard writes, but also *how* he writes what he writes. And if one could wish for a future reading of Kierkegaard, I would wish for a less reverent, more flippant reading than in earlier generations. A reading that delivers a type of restrained affection or a 'sympathetic antipathy'—to say it along with Vigilius Haufniensis. A reading that makes use of the rhetorical discipline and irony that the authorship itself prefers, but at the same time turns irony upon itself in order to counteract itself. A reading that does not fall for a reductionistic theory of stages, and is not blind to the existential progression and conceptual development throughout the authorship. A reading that does not naively lead the work back to the author behind it, but that is aware of the complex and dramatic connection between life and writing. A reading that mixes blood and ink with a science of cheerfulness, and thus, in praxis, shows that cheerfulness can be a part of science, and that seriousness is never necessarily found where it seems most obvious. A reading with a sense for rhetoric—a sense that rhetoric is not merely decoration and exterior ornamentation, but is essentially written into the discourse and is thus inextricable from both epistemology and edification. And finally, a reading that bears witness to the fact that the seemingly most useless parts of the Kierkegaardian corpus—everything in the margins and all the fragmentary material—is in reality the most indispensable, since it opposes every attempt to instrumentalize the texts and thereby be done with them. And if one asks why such a sense is important, the answer is simple: the indispensability of the useless corresponds to—in fact, is repeated in—the most fundamental existential phenomena that the authorship captures and illuminates both negatively and positively: phenomena like anxiety, despair, trust, devotion, faith, and forgiveness—which also are just as useless and indispensable.

May a sense for the indispensability of the useless therefore be an edifying pulse in every deconstructive reading of Kierkegaard. — Joakim Garff¹

i

One could write endlessly about the hermeneutical challenges that Kierkegaard's authorship poses, itself an indicator of the authorship's apophatic elusiveness. What I intend in this chapter is to open a few of these challenges, not in order to resolve them but simply to enter them, to mark or trace some of winding curves of Kierkegaard's writing through which it withdraws from

¹ Joakim Garff, "The Esthetic is Above All My Element," in *The New Kierkegaard*. ed. Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 69-70.

direct appropriation and understanding. The relation between form and content will emerge as my central preoccupation. Mark Jordan notes that, “The theological reception of Kierkegaard has been a long denial of his experimentation with forms...Kierkegaard’s most striking experiments with form are set aside, with palpable relief, as super-subtle and superfluous ironies, raucous excesses unrelated to his pedagogical purposes.”² Jordan locates the denial of Kierkegaard’s experimentation with forms in the desire to find in him a “reassuring orthodoxy” in which his “extraordinary range of voices and genres, of histrionic gestures and fantastic scenes, is...dismissed as so much adolescent rebellion now happily surpassed.”³ With Jordan, I regard attention to form to be essential to reading Kierkegaard well, to reading him well *theologically*. An inattention to genre, style, mood, and the pervasively theatrical character of Kierkegaard’s writing diminishes its interpretation significantly. Specifically, it disallows full recognition of how pervasive its apophaticism is, an apophaticism that constitutes its theological core. Attending to the apophatic in Kierkegaard is not simply a matter of pointing out the passages that mention silence or infinite qualitative difference. More is required of the interpreter, namely, an attention to how the forms of Kierkegaard’s writing aim to open the reader out toward what they cannot say directly. As Heidegger puts it: “The point is not to listen to a series of propositions, but rather to follow the movement of showing.”⁴ What follows in this chapter is an attempt at a kind of “attunement” to how the apophatic shows itself in Kierkegaard’s texts, a showing that is always at the same time a hiding.

The movement of this chapter, therefore, will not strictly conform to what is typically taken to be proper academic style: a logical sequence of steps that produce the form of an

² Mark Jordan, “The Modernity of Christian Theology *or* Writing Kierkegaard Again for the First Time,” *Modern Theology* 27:3 July 2011, 449.

³ Jordan, “Writing Kierkegaard Again,” 449.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 2.

argument. Kierkegaard does not write this way. He does not argue in scientific sequences. He persuades by performing otherwise, in artistic sequences. His aim is not to secure the legitimacy or finality of propositions but to open theaters of communication in which readers can roam and respond freely. (There is an ethics of writing here). Kierkegaard's texts seek to form the heart, and therefore their forms seek to disrupt the result-oriented scientific mind and the forms of truth it presupposes. Kierkegaardian truth is art rather than science: "The subjective thinker is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist. To exist is an art."⁵ My aim in this chapter is to let some of this artistry show itself, to let it speak toward the silence it seeks to communicate.

ii

I want to begin by highlighting the difficulty of finding a position or point of view from which to comment on Kierkegaard's texts in such a way that does not betray them, block their flow, or overwhelm their elusiveness. The difficulty is that the aim of Kierkegaard's writing is not the production of objects of scientific analysis, even if scientific analysis of his writings is entirely possible. The aim of Kierkegaard's writing is the enacted life of *hiin Enkelte*, "that single individual," whose life as enacted withdraws from objective analysis. How does one comment on a writer who writes toward that which continually withdraws from and resists objective analysis? How does this withdrawal, and the failure to represent that which withdraws, show up in the commentary? That is the difficulty.

There are no simple or straightforward solutions to this difficulty. It is the difficulty of commenting on apophatic discourse generally, which, as Michael Sells emphasizes, should be distinguished from apophatic "theory."⁶ Apophatic discourse, rather than directly theorizing what cannot be said as an object of thought, continually reverts upon and moves against itself,

⁵ CUP, 351.

⁶ Sells, Michael. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

performatively unsaying itself. To comment on apophatic discourse as if its subject matter were something simply present and available to be commented on is to betray that discourse deeply. It is to attempt to force out into the open what desires to remain in secret.

Apophatic discourses themselves are of course caught in the same dilemma. To speak of what cannot be said, even to speak of it as “unsayable,” is a betrayal of what cannot be said. What marks apophatic discourses as apophatic is not so much their taking up “the unsayable” as an object of thought. It is more their refusal to stay put or occupy a determinate discursive position, their willingness to take back and negate everything that is given in speech, even negations, or to take back as the manner of giving, destabilizing both affirmation and negation. It is this elusiveness and unceasing movement, often quite subtle, that the commentator must become attuned to, with a patience, humility, and artistic ear that work against the scientific desire to “master” texts.

The simultaneity of giving and taking back, a way of writing that weds itself neither simply to affirmation nor simply to negation, and therefore maintains itself above all as a *way* or path or movement rather than a series of achieved propositions or conclusions, is what Kierkegaard practices as “indirect communication” and “double-reflection.”⁷ Indirection and double-reflection form discourse as a movement of unceasing *de*-flection in which the movement of thought and articulation does not simply return to itself as re-flection, as achieved concepts or conclusions. To “double” reflection is to in-direct it, to deflect thought off itself, to un-master it. Such deflection, which requires that one write at a slant or with a swerve, with an artistic touch and flare, is how Kierkegaard lets discourse remain restless, beyond any determinate position or self-possessed meaning. Indirect communication, which seeks to communicate what cannot be

⁷ CUP, 73ff.

said, to speak and not speak at the same time, is the opening of an apophatic hermeneutical space between text and reader in which meaning or truth is never directly or objectively present. The meaning or truth that Kierkegaard's texts perform is always one that is to be opened and enacted silently, secretly, and singularly by *hiin Enkelte*. Truth occurs only as it is deflected into the reader's own lived existence rather than reflected in an abstract consciousness.

It is crucial to recognize here that indirection is not an adventitious feature of Kierkegaard's writing, as if behind its literary elusiveness lies a body of objective content that is the abstractable "point" of the authorship. The inability to communicate truth objectively goes, as it were, all the way down. Indirection responds to the *essential* elusiveness of truth, its essential withdrawnness and uncertainty, which is only heightened and intensified as one moves from the aesthetic through the ethical to the religious. The paradoxical simultaneity of giving and taking back that indirection enacts is not simply a clever literary method. It finds its deepest justification and impetus, indeed its necessity, in the weightiest of Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological categories, above all in the paradoxical simultaneity of time and eternity that religiousness enacts in which time is thrown open, off itself, into an infinite beginning by eternity coming into existence in time. Kierkegaard's writing unfolds at this intersection, in the passion between time and eternity in which they touch, elusively. He writes, one might say, with one eye looking into time, the other looking into eternity, with a sort of crossed-eyed double-vision. The eye facing eternity faces a nothingness, a blank, a blinding and therefore Kierkegaard, if you will, *winks* at his reader as he writes, disrupting and deflecting his own discourse even as he writes it, "writing in order to erase,"⁸ the way a wink disrupts and deflects the gaze even as it performs it. This is exactly the sense of *Øieblikket*, the glance of the eye, in

⁸ EUD, 67.

which eternity approaches and withdraws in the same instant, opening time forward. An approach that withdraws as it approaches, deflecting its own approach, is one that makes room. Kierkegaard writing, I am claiming, moves to the rhythm of such an opening. He writes in order to make room for his reader, to release the reader forward into the roominess that eternity opens in time, rather than to suffocate her or him with a smothering, tightly determined discourse.

Through multiple gestures (irony, humor, playfulness, hyperbole, a plurality of genres and moods, pseudonymity, etc.), Kierkegaard inscribes an indetermination into the heart of his authorship, an excess or roominess that should be let be. The goal for the commentator, I would suggest, ought to be to avoid translating the movement of indirection and deflection into something masterable or finalizable by scientific thought, as if it were simply a method for delivering certain definable results, or something to be tidied up into useable conclusions or concepts. Kierkegaard writes beyond the concept, beyond even his own concepts, or he allows a beyond, a rupture, a fragmenting, a winking into the writing of concepts. He writes not in order to secure for himself or for his reader objective conclusions but in order to release and revitalize subjectivity: an energy, a passion, a sense, an anger, a tenderness, a sorrow, a joy, a laughter that concepts as such cannot allow to burst forth.

Hiin Enkelte, “that single individual,” is the limit concept of Kierkegaard’s writing, the limit of the concept, the stumbling block on which every concept trips and falls, or else learns to dance, to get off itself. *Hiin*—“that”—pushes *Enkelte* beyond the concept, beyond the abstraction of “the” individual to *that one, right here*. *Hiin* indicates the movement of an address—“My dear reader!”—an address that is already a response to what opens, to what is given, prior to thought and prior to speech, the sheer *thatness* of that other, the shock of relation and responsibility that elicits a joy (and suffering) that arrives before language and outlasts it. One might think of the

joy of babies (in-fants, non-speakies), little balls of beginning and birth, who learn to smile in the presence of the other before they learn to speak, who burst with the joy (and suffering) of existence before learning the “ambiguous art”⁹ of language. Kierkegaard writes in order to return his reader to, to repeat forward, this smile older (and newer) than speech:

Thus the upbuilding address is fighting in many ways for the eternal to be victorious in a person, but in the appropriate place and with the aid of the lily and the bird, it does not forget first and foremost to relax into a smile. Relax, you struggling one! One can forget how to laugh, but God keep a person from ever forgetting how to smile!¹⁰

Kierkegaard’s wink always comes with a smile, an apophatic smile, with the joy of relating and communicating outside of, beyond, prior to, along the edge of, or simply without the concept. Academics, as a rule, are trained to forget how to smile, especially in their writing. To read Kierkegaard well, however, one must be able to see him smiling and winking and dancing, letting the outside in.

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None of this requires the abandonment of critical thought or academic precision, only that they must be allowed to founder upon “the illusiveness of the infinite”¹¹ which withdraws from any direct communication or understanding. Apophatic, indirect communication “invests everything in the process of becoming and omits the result.”¹² Johannes Climacus calls this “having style.”¹³ The writer who has style “is never finished with something but ‘stirs the waters of language’ whenever he begins, so that to him the most ordinary expression comes into existence with newborn originality.”¹⁴ Style expresses itself as a perpetual beginning, a coming into existence

⁹ EUD, 231.

¹⁰ CD, 12.

¹¹ CUP, 86.

¹² CUP, 73.

¹³ CUP, 86.

¹⁴ CUP, 86.

that has no objective telos. One might say it is a saying that omits any finalized said, or a saying that is itself the to-be-said, a saying which lets speech abide in its birth rather than in its closure. The author who writes with apophatic style desires not to win the reader to a cause or agenda but is concerned above all, as Climacus puts it, with “setting the other free.”¹⁵ Commentary alive to such a concern for the reader’s freedom, commentary that comments with style, might learn to write apophatically about apophasis, or indirectly about indirection, winking back at Kierkegaard’s wink.

The real difficulty of reading Kierkegaard lies not in synthesizing a massive and complex body of writing, although this is difficulty enough. Kierkegaard would call this “worldly” difficulty, the kind of difficulty that concerns “assistant professors.” The existential, spiritual difficulty of reading Kierkegaard, especially since “Kierkegaard” is an academic industry, lies in learning how to resist turning his writing into something directly appropriable, whether in the form of careerist academic commentary or literal spiritual protocols. Kierkegaard desires to withdraw from the scene of his writing as an authority. His aim is to incite thinking and spiritual searching but never to give anybody direct answers. Attending to this withdrawal is the central difficulty.

In a draft of a preface to a collection of upbuilding discourses, Kierkegaard writes of his desire to withdraw:

Dear Reader, please accept this dedication. It is offered, as it were, blindly, but therefore in all honesty, untroubled by any other consideration. I do not know who you are; I do not know where you are; I do not know your name—I do not even know if you exist or if you perhaps did exist and are no more, or whether your time is still coming. Yet you are my hope, my joy, my pride, in the uncertainty of you, my honor—because if I knew you personally with a worldly certainty, this would be my shame, my guilt—and my honor would be lost. It comforts me, dear reader, that you have this opportunity, the opportunity for which I know I have honestly worked. If it were feasible that reading what I write came to be common practice, or at least pretending to have read it in hopes of getting

¹⁵ CUP, 74.

ahead in the world, this would not be the opportune time for *my* reader, because then the misunderstanding would have triumphed...No, if reading what I write becomes a dubious good...or still better, if it becomes foolish and ludicrous to read my writings, or even better, if it becomes a contemptible matter so that no one dares to acknowledge it, that is the opportune time for *my* reader; then he does not read for my sake or for the world's sake—but for his own sake, then he reads in such a way that he does not seek my acquaintance but avoids it—and then he is *my* reader.¹⁶

To be an academic reader of Kierkegaard is perhaps de facto to cease to be *his* reader, the reader he longed for, who reads in secret. To read Kierkegaard “objectively,” I might even venture, is to *misread* him. Those seeking the authorial intention behind Kierkegaard's texts will find a *Gelassenheit*, a letting go of the text, a letting be of the reader, a withdrawal that opens the space of edification.

I say all of this not to disparage the genre of academic commentary—here I am after all!—but I do want to signal the limitations of this genre, limitations that become particularly acute when commenting on a figure like Kierkegaard. His authorship sits awkwardly within academic discourse. I do not take his mockery of “assistant professors” as an isolated critique of 19th century Hegelians. I take it as a perpetual challenge to the academic mind and vocation as such. It is not that Kierkegaard does not give the academic mind an abundance of important material to think about. His writing, however, is rooted in and invites participation in an apophatic impulse and energy that cannot be tamed by scientific or professional frames. It unleashes what William Franke calls “the unruly energy of the unsayable.”¹⁷ Attending to such energy, as Franke writes, “calls for rethinking some of the elementary automatisms of our reading, which is continually at risk of degenerating into mere consumption of standardized intellectual commodities.”¹⁸ Kierkegaard's texts find their home in silent appropriation and the

¹⁶ JP, 5948.

¹⁷ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 6.

¹⁸ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 6.

personal witness of an enacted life. Reading them well therefore requires intuiting something beyond their positive, scientifically transcribable sense. As Craig Keen puts it:

To read Kierkegaard well is alternately to feel the warm breeze of a bright autumn evening, the biting gust of a blizzard in the dead of winter, the cool rain-scented rush at the forward edge of a fast moving hot summer storm; or alternately to hear the first gasp and cry of a newborn baby, the faint rattle in the throat of a dying parent, the rapid breathing of lovers, the sob and sigh of an abandoned child, the near breathless spasms at the end of a prolonged bout of laughter. Kierkegaard is the wind.¹⁹

Academic framing ought, therefore, to keep its edges wild. Perhaps then it might make room for what exceeds and unsettles them.²⁰

iii

To communicate with style is to enter and suffer the “passion of thought.”²¹ To think and write along with Kierkegaard’s texts is to follow a movement of “reduplication” [*Fordoblelse*]²² in which “what” is thought is not separable from “how” it is thought, “which is ‘the earnestness.’”²³

Content reduplicates as form in Kierkegaard, specifically as forms that perform their own incompleteness: “This again is the dialectical movement...or it is the dialectical method:

¹⁹ Craig Keen, “Prayer: Standing Up to the Coming of God,” Unpublished paper, 2013.

²⁰ Kierkegaard’s own academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, pushes on the borders of academic framing. Not only did he write in Danish instead of the more academically proper Latin, he experimented with a free-flowing style that he anticipated would receive pushback from his examiners: “I have worked on this dissertation with fear and trembling lest my dialectic swallow too much. The ease of style will be censured. One or another half-educated Hegelian robber will say that the subjective is too prominent. First of all, I will ask him not to plague me with a rehash of this new wisdom that I must already regard as old, also not to place such great claims upon me: [let it be recognized] that the idea’s own movements should take place through me, that the idea should break out in me (for most young people burst forth, like the woman in *Ludlams Hule*, with a rustic region behind them), and, finally, [recognize] that one cannot write about a negative concept except in this way; and I ask him, instead of continually giving assurances that doubt is overcome, irony conquered, to permit it to speak for once. Moreover, whether I may have been too effusive at times, and since Hegel says with authority that the mind is the best epitomizer...let me be judged modestly and without any demands, but I will not be judged by boys...and if it should seem to one or another that this is madness, I will reply with Soc. (*Phaedrus*, 244 a): ‘[That would be right if it were an invariable truth that madness is an evil, but in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent].’ And if something should be found, particularly in the first part of the dissertation, that one is generally not accustomed to come across in scholarly writings, the reader must forgive my jocundity, also that I, in order to lighten the burden, sometimes sing at my work.” CI, 440-1.

²¹ PF, 37.

²² PV, 9n.

²³ PV, 9n.

in *working* also to *work against oneself*, which is reduplication [*Fordoblelse*].”²⁴ His authors aim to write ironically about irony, doubtfully about doubt, lovingly about love, passionately about passion. This means that content is never directly given and that the form or feel of the writing “says” just as much, if not more, than any positive content of the writing. The mood, attunement, or tone of a text is absolutely essential, perhaps most essential.²⁵ This is not a mere stylistic or rhetorical preference for interesting and elusive writing. It has everything to do with the nature of thought itself, of the inseparability and mutual destabilization of thought, affect, and writing.

Thought is thoroughly dialectical, for Kierkegaard’s Climacus: that which incites and enables thinking also ruptures and “torments”²⁶ thinking at its most intimate and inceptual point. The passion of thought, “which is fundamentally present everywhere in thought,”²⁷ is its impulsion towards “paradox.”²⁸ Without paradox, thought is like a “lover without passion: a mediocre fellow.”²⁹ Thought desires above all to be drawn beyond itself before a paradox; it wants “to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”³⁰ Crucially, it is not just that thought wishes to acknowledge paradoxes at a comfortable distance, assigning them a place within the larger scope of reason—as is the case, perhaps, with Kant’s “antinomies.” Paradox is

²⁴ PV, 9n. Continuing: “To endeavor or to work *directly* is to work or to endeavor directly in immediate connection with a factually given state of things. The dialectical method is the *reverse*: in working also to work against oneself, a reduplication [*Fordoblelse*], which is ‘the earnestness,’ like the pressure on the plow that determines the depth of the furrow, whereas the direct endeavor is a glossing-over, which is finished more rapidly and also is much, much more rewarding—that is, it is worldliness and homogeneity.”

²⁵ JP, 6032: “I have finished ‘Works of Love,’ final copy and all. While working on No. VIII I felt a little tired and thought of traveling to Berlin. I did not dare allow myself that for fear of getting too far away from the decisive mood. I stuck it out. God be praised, it went all right. Oh, while people deride and ridicule all the work I do, I thank God who grants success to it. Yes, take everything else I have had, the best is still an original and, God be praised, indestructible blessed conception that God is love. No matter how hopeless things have seemed to me many times, I scrape together all the best thoughts I can muster of what a loving person is and say to myself: This is what God is every moment.”

²⁶ PF, 44.

²⁷ PF, 37.

²⁸ PF, 37.

²⁹ PF, 37.

³⁰ PF, 37.

not just the content or “what” of thought, but also its “how,” its style. Paradox reduplicates itself into the very movement of thinking. Thought is itself a “paradoxical passion,”³¹ simultaneously willing and un-willing itself, at once elicited and undone by what it cannot think—elicited as undone. In willing itself before a paradox, thought “wills its own downfall.”³² Thought is akin to the movement of walking understood as “continuous falling,” which is different from the “progress” and “mediation” of one “who unswervingly follows his nose.”³³ Before what it cannot think, thought is pushed, or falls, beyond itself, beyond all reasons and concepts toward what is absolutely ungraspable. Thought fulfills its vocation by “letting go.”³⁴

The most appropriate metaphor for thought, then, is “erotic love.”³⁵ Before a lover, the self is elicited as undone: “self-love has foundered.”³⁶ To make love to a lover is to be elicited into oneself, yet without possessing oneself, because one becomes nothing but one’s exposure to the other. Lovers will themselves as ecstatic openings, continuously undoing enclosure and putting themselves at the mercy and desire of the other. Likewise, when released into itself before what it cannot think, the self-enclosure of thought founders and thought is launched toward an infinite opening. Thought becomes erotically open, even orgasmic: “language breaks down, and thought is bewildered.”³⁷

Erotic vulnerability and passion are the syntax of thought, its rhythm and pulse. Lovers allow their bodies to come to themselves as skin, as limit, as exposure, exposed to another skin, another limit, another exposure. Likewise, thought coming to itself arrives at its limit, its exposure before what it cannot think. The passion of thought is thought thinking along its own

³¹ PF, 38.

³² PF, 39.

³³ PF, 37.

³⁴ PF, 43.

³⁵ PF, 48.

³⁶ PF, 48.

³⁷ EO 1, 230.

exposure before what it can perhaps touch but never grasp, undone by the limit, the skin of a lover.

Another name for this “paradoxical passion” is *writing*, by which I don’t simply mean the physical act of making marks on a surface, but the unsutureable cut or difference that separates thought from itself, its being given to and tasked with itself along with the impossibility of ever arriving at or forming itself as a whole. Writing is the name for thought undergoing its exposure to time, which is a movement of “repetition” rather than “recollection,” thought walking, tumbling, or dancing forward into the unknown rather than sneaking out of life backward into what it already knows. To write is to skim along the edge or surface of thought, inhabiting thought as a movement of exposure to what infinitely exceeds it.

Repetition and its erotic passion is found everywhere in Kierkegaard’s writing. For instance, Nicolaus Notebene’s book *Prefaces* reduplicates writing-as-repetition into the very form of a (quasi) book, anticipating, by performing it, Derrida’s claim, “the preface is everywhere; it is bigger than the book.”³⁸ *Prefaces* is a collection of prefaces, with a preface. It is a repetition of beginnings, of beginnings to books that never get written, showing, perhaps, the perennial situation of writing. One can only ever write within the infinite deflection of “the book.” All writing is a preface to what doesn’t get written, to what cannot be said. Writing can only ever repeat its own beginning, without end.

The narrative frame of *Prefaces* is the tragi-comic situation of one Nicolaus Notebene who longs with erotic passion to be a writer. He is married, however, and his marriage does not allow for such erotic pursuits. The day he got married he chose, officially at least, devotion to the task of marriage, which, as his wife repeatedly reminds him, means that he must forsake any

³⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 56.

devotion to writing. Nicolaus' ingenious solution to this dilemma is to write without *really* becoming a writer. He will be a writer of mere prefaces! He will write only lead-ups to books. He will only flirt with the possibility of the book and perhaps engage in a bit of foreplay, but never fully consummate a relation to writing that would lead to the birth of a book. This will allow him, officially at least, not to forsake devotion to his ethical duties. His wife begrudgingly accepts this solution, although this does not stop her on one occasion from trying to burn Nicolaus' manuscripts with impunity.

Writing along the limit of the preface, however, turns out to be an ambiguous solution. It seems to redouble Nicolaus' erotic passion for writing rather than safely confine it. Flirting with the book *incites* passion, causing language to erupt, to disseminate wildly. Let me quote a long passage from the preface to *Prefaces* that puts Nicolaus' erotic passion on display. One can feel in this passage the pleasure of writing, the pleasure of repetition, the pleasure of beginning again and again and again. Form and content here are inseparable, reduplicated into each other with erotic intensity. Nicolaus writes:

A preface is a mood. Writing a preface is like sharpening a scythe; like tuning a guitar; like chatting with a child; like spitting out of the window. One does not know how it happens; the desire comes upon one, the desire fabulously to tremble in the mood of productivity, the desire to write a preface, the desire for these *leves sub noctem susurri* [quiet whisperings when night falls]. Writing a preface is like ringing at a man's door to bamboozle him; like walking past a young girl's window and looking at the cobblestones; it is like lashing with one's stick in the air at the wind; like tipping one's hat though one greets no one. Writing a preface is like having done something that entitles one to a certain amount of attention; like having something on one's conscience that tempts one to confide; like bowing in invitation to dance, then not moving; like pressing the left leg in, tightening the reins to the right, and hearing the steed say, 'Prff,' and oneself not caring a fig for the whole world; it is like joining in without suffering the least inconvenience from joining in; like standing on Valby hill and staring after the wild geese. Writing a preface is like having arrived with the stagecoach at the first posthouse, waiting in the dark shed, sensing what is going to appear, seeing the gate and with that heaven opened, beholding before one the country highway which constantly has more before it, glimpsing the forest's expectant secret, the footpath's seductive disappearing, hearing the sound of the post horn and Echo's beckoning invitation, hearing the coachman's mighty

whip crack and the forest's confused repetition, and the traveler's cheerful conversation. Writing a preface is like having arrived, standing in the cozy room, greeting the character desired by nostalgia, sitting in an armchair, filling one's pipe, lighting it—and having so infinitely much to talk about with each other. Writing a preface is like bending aside a branch in the jasmine hut and seeing her who sits in secret: my beloved. Thus, oh thus, it is to write prefaces. And what is the one who writes them like? He goes in and out among people like a jester in winter and a fool in summer; he is hello and goodbye in one person, always happy and carefree, pleased with himself, a really frivolous good-for-nothing, indeed an immoral person, for he does not go to the Stock Exchange to scrape money together but only strolls through it. He does not talk about annual general meetings, because the air is too stuffy; he does not propose toasts in any Society because one has to give notice several days in advance; he does not run errands for the System; he pays no installments on the national debt; indeed he does not even take it seriously. He goes through life in the way a cobbler's apprentice goes whistling down the street, even if the one who is to use the boots is standing waiting—he has to wait as long as there is a single stride left or the least sight worth seeing. Thus, yes thus, is the one who writes prefaces.³⁹

After citing such a passage, I find myself compelled to break off my own writing and simply smile for a while with no need to worry about extracting the passage's meaning. There is a kind of reduplicating revelry here that is simply to be enjoyed. And then after sitting with this pleasurable nothingness opened through Nicoclaus' effusive outpouring, I can begin again with my own writing, perhaps differently, less acquisitively.

The effect of this writing is to disarm and disrupt the relentlessly teleological drive of the mind. A writer of prefaces is someone who never gets past the pleasure of beginning, the joy of the inceptual moment of thought. Such a writer reverts or reduplicates writing into itself, away from the ethical respectability and wholeness of "the book." Such writing does not participate in the stuffy air of polite society and its result-driven money economy. It has no desire to find itself giving speeches to any official society. One has to plan for such things, after all. Prefaces, however, live only for the repetition of today, the opening, like the lilies and the birds, creation's wonderful little prefaces who run no errands for the System and care nothing about the national

³⁹ PWS, 5-6.

debt or the long term success of scientific scholarship. Writing that writes for today pleasures itself rather than seeking the pleasure of official recognition. Its desire is not to announce and establish itself in an identity, but to hold an “expectant secret,” to become a “seductive disappearing.” This is writing that trembles with immoral, fabulous desire, wanting only to keep itself trembling in secret.

Fear and Trembling is shot through with the same passion for the repeated beginning. Abraham is a preface-like figure that haunts the pages of *the* book, the Bible, trembling in a beginning outside of ethics, prior to the giving of the law, outside of any calculative economy of thought, desire, or time. Abraham is a figure of the absurd promise, a wildly uncertain beginning that holds desire open in the face of impossibility, the impossibility of producing, securing, or anticipating its own fulfillment, a fulfillment made impossible by the call to journey to Moriah. Abraham desires and hopes in the face of the unthinkable, in the face of what cannot be thought, absurdly so. His wish is not for a direct conclusion, satisfaction, or fulfillment. He desires and hopes that he will be returned, he knows not how, to the beginning, without end, that he will begin again with Isaac, in joy, even though the cut that differentiates every moment of time from the next, the cut of the eternal, never ceases to disrupt and make uncertain his best laid plans, his possession of himself and his others.

To hope like this, to hope in the face of the impossible, by virtue of the impossible, the impossibility of closure, is to tremble with fabulous desire. “It is great to give up one’s desire, but it is greater to hold fast to it after having given it up”⁴⁰—like Nicolaus holding fast to, “repeating,” his desire to write even though he gives up the desire to be an official writer of “books.” This repetition of writing by virtue of the impossibility of the book imbues his writing

⁴⁰ FTR, 18.

with a kind of madness, a “really frivolous good-for-nothing” passion for the never-surpassed beginning that looks absurd and immoral from the point of view of ethical, scholarly, economically conscientious desire.

Likewise, Abraham’s consent to the divine call to love Isaac “absurdly,” that is, to love Isaac only by loving him anew on the other side of the death of official, ethically readable identity, is also a kind of madness. Abraham knows how wonderful it would be to let his love be a readable, respectable book: “He knows that it is beautiful and beneficial to be the single individual who translates himself into the universal, the one who, so to speak, personally produces a trim, clean, and, as far as possible, faultless edition of himself, readable by all.”⁴¹ But Abraham is called to a higher love, a love not writable in any book, a love that does not write its own conclusion by translating itself into the security and relief of ethical recognition, but a love that writes only its beginning in order to wait upon the other with utter vulnerability, patience, and unknowing, letting desire become love’s desire, the yearning to let the other remain other, a gift one will never possess. Abraham’s exit from the ethical is not a destruction of the ethical. It is nothing but his re-entrance into it otherwise, a repetition of the ethical that re-launches it off itself, opening within it a love that receives the other only by letting go, absolutely. To abide in this repetition, in this trembling beginning without guarantee, is to love madly: “Humanly speaking, he is mad and cannot make himself understandable to anyone. And yet ‘to be mad’ is the mildest expression.”⁴²

This preface-like desire for the repeated beginning is reduplicated in the very form of *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes de Silentio cannot write Abraham into a coherent narrative or logical sequence that gets further than the gesture of beginning. Every time he tries he gets

⁴¹ FTR, 76.

⁴² FTR, 76.

derailed into admiration, bewilderment, or silence and he has to begin again. *Fear and Trembling*, on my count, begins itself *nine* different times. It is not a “book” with a clean sequence of beginning, middle, and end. It is a series of stuttering departures that circle around an impossibility, the impossibility of understanding or thinking or writing the movement of faith.

The ending of *Fear and Trembling*, its epilogue, is not a closing of the book, a gesture of finality, summation, or arrival, but a repetition of the beginning of the book, a gesture of opening or departure. Johannes returns in the epilogue to where he began in the preface, namely, the exhaustion of the modern age and its abandonment of absolute tasks. An absolute task is one that remains eternally “young and beautiful,”⁴³ always only beginning. The only absolute task Johannes names directly is “love.”⁴⁴ The task of faith is to learn love’s absoluteness, its infinite beginning. *Fear and Trembling* aims itself at this infinite beginning, and so, it might be said, it never gets anywhere. Its epilogue gets no further than its preface, making the whole book a kind of preface. Beginning and ending, departure and arrival become paradoxically simultaneous in the very form of the book, echoing and putting into play its content. Faith is an absolute beginning, an infinite opening or departure. “But what did Abraham do?...He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the rode.”⁴⁵

Nicolaus and Johannes, like Socrates, don’t know how to write books. They are full of too much erotic passion for what cannot be said. They are poets of the impossibility of the book. As Kierkegaard writes of Socrates:

He certainly was an eroticist of the highest order; he had an extraordinary enthusiasm for knowledge—in short, had all of spirit’s seductive gifts; but inform, fill up, enrich he could not do. In this sense, one would dare perhaps to call him a *seducer*. He infatuated

⁴³ FTR, 121.

⁴⁴ FTR, 121.

⁴⁵ FTR, 35.

the youths, *awoke longings* in them, but did *not satisfy* them, let them flare up in the thrilling enjoyment of contact, but never gave them strong and nourishing food.⁴⁶

To write by virtue of the impossibility of the book, by virtue of the passion of thought, is to let thought flare up in the thrilling enjoyment of contact with the skin, the edge of thought, exposed to its own opening with an infinite desire that knows no satisfaction. To write is to keep desire going, to keep thought in motion non-possessively, “continually having one’s pen poised for what comes next,”⁴⁷ eternally called out of one’s homeland forward into the unknown, where there “winds a lonesome trail, steep and narrow...outside of the universal.”⁴⁸ One can think and write along this trail only if one is willing to tremble in secret with fabulous, apophatic desire, with unspeakable sorrow, hope, longing, and joy.

iv

Kierkegaard’s authorship, like Hegel’s, is a thinking of the absolute, a movement toward the synthesis of the infinite and the finite through writing. And like Hegel’s, Kierkegaard’s authorship undertakes this movement by uniting form and content: the content of thought emerges only within the very movement of thinking as it forms itself. Moreover, for both Kierkegaard and Hegel, thought forms itself around its own negativity, its own difference from itself. Thought moves by exceeding itself, by driving toward its own negation, which is to say, by *writing*, by letting the difference time makes time the rhythm of thought.

This is why Derrida can say that Hegel is not simply the champion of the achieved concept and the return to the same: “Hegel is *also* the thinker of irreducible difference...the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing.”⁴⁹ Hegel’s dialectic is necessarily a

⁴⁶ CI, 188.

⁴⁷ WL, 252.

⁴⁸ FTR, 76.

⁴⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. trans. Gayatri Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 28.

written movement, a movement of “mediation,” which names the impossibility of pure presence. Content must undergo form, the form-ation of writing, in order to be truth. And therefore truth, the absolute, is never undialectically self-identical but always shot through with “difference.” The absolute is splayed out across the differencing movement that is writing.⁵⁰

What is not often appreciated is how close Kierkegaard and Hegel are on this point. For both, thought never has direct objects. *What* is thought is always a certain *how*, the movement of thinking relating itself to itself across difference and in that self-relating opening an indirect or dialectical relation to what it thinks, one that never achieves the pure presence of what is thought. Both Kierkegaard and Hegel write truth as process, truth as becoming, as a movement that traverses difference. Both understand deeply the intimate co-implication of thinking and what is thought, of the “how” and the “what,” and both display this co-implication by letting thought do its work through writing. Both seek through writing to let the movement that is truth show itself.

And yet, for all of their similarity, for all of Hegel’s deep and profound influence on Kierkegaard on this point, there is, of course, a point where the two authors, precisely in their writing, diverge sharply from one another. As I said, both authors are writers of the absolute, of the synthesis of the infinite and the finite, which is to say that both write in order to bring the absolute into consciousness. Kierkegaard, however, through multiple strategies of writing, will relentlessly evoke and perform the *impossibility* of the absolute’s mediation into consciousness. Performing this impossibility through writing is precisely how Kierkegaard brings the absolute into consciousness. To be conscious of the absolute is to be conscious of the impossibility of mediating the absolute within consciousness, which is to be conscious of consciousness’ own limit as an exposure to its outside, to “nothing.”

⁵⁰ For my understanding of Hegel here, I am indebted to my friend Johan de Jong’s wonderful dissertation, “The Movement of Thinking: Hegel – Heidegger – Derrida,” University of Amsterdam, 2015.

This nothing, as I've emphasized, is not an elsewhere, some "beyond" just on the other side of the limits of reason that does not intrude on reason's domain.⁵¹ This nothing is the very opening of consciousness right here, at and as its heart, an opening more intimate to consciousness than it is to itself the way, as Derrida emphasizes, the gaps and fissures between words and letters, which *time* language, are an opening closer to writing than it is to itself. What transcends consciousness is not "out there" over against it. Transcendence, the outside, is radically interior, so interior so as to be anterior to consciousness, the nothing of an instant that births the present, the gift of time.⁵² Kierkegaard writes, impossibly, toward this anteriority, toward the blank page, the beginning prior to all beginning.

This impossibility of writing the absolute is a repetition of the impossibility that constitutes selfhood most basically. The self that writes is a displaced self, set adrift over 70,000 fathoms. Existential subjectivity, for Kierkegaard, because it cannot recuperate its own origin, the instant of its being given, its birth to presence, is constitutively burdened with the task of synthesizing itself with ("appropriating") an impossibility, the impossibility of the origin, the origin's withdrawal. This takes the form of "paradox," the self synthesizing elements that cannot be synthesized, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity.⁵³ These elements cannot be synthesized because there is "no third factor"⁵⁴ in which synthesis becomes possible. The self must always be synthesizing itself with its origin in the absence of any principle of synthesis, synthesizing by virtue of the impossibility of synthesis. An unsuturable difference cuts through the self, the cut of its being given, opening a difference more

⁵¹ Kierkegaard thinks limit differently than Kant. One might say that he thinks limit not as what bounds consciousness but as the edge where consciousness is exposed to its own nothingness, to the gaping hole around which it is organized.

⁵² This is the difference *Philosophical Fragments* traces between the transcendence grasped through "recollection" and the transcendence undergone in "the moment" or "instant"—transcendence as "repetition forward."

⁵³ SUD, 13.

⁵⁴ CA, 85.

intimate to the self than it is to itself. Inwardness or interiority is this difference, the place where the self is dis-placed, where it gapes open before the infinite.

The absence of a third factor that would synthesize dialectic opposites—the finite and the infinite, time and eternity, freedom and necessity, the self and God, etc.—does not mean that dialectical opposites remain alienated from each other, cut off from reconciliation. It means that their reconciliation is not an achievable *concept* but the living *play* of their encounter, the play of their difference, the spark⁵⁵ ignited between two edges that touch, a *happening* in a lived existence. Life, rather than the concept, is the arena of reconciliation, meaning that reconciliation happens only in “the instant,” like a spark, vanishing as soon as it arrives, arriving as a vanishing. This makes reconciliation a living *work*, a “repetition,” vulnerable, uncertain, exposed at every turn to surprise, unpredictability, failure, unknowing, and the necessity of beginning again. The writing of reconciliation will therefore be a writing that moves with the uncertain rhythms of living rather than the rhythms of the concept, which means a writing that has the feel of art rather than science, or of science becoming art. It will be a writing concerned above all with *edification*.

For Hegel, however, the absolute simply *is* the principle of synthesis, of “absolute knowing” in which the concept is the arena of reconciliation. The absolute is the impossibility of any outside to consciousness. It is the principle through which all wounds of negativity heal: “the wounds of Spirit heal and leave no scars behind.”⁵⁶ Consciousness is absolute. The movement of Spirit is the mediated movement of consciousness proceeding from itself as its own origin back into itself as its own goal. Hegel’s system, whatever its possibilities for an affirmation of endless

⁵⁵ Eckhart uses the language of “spark” to speak of the birth of God in the soul.

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 407.

negativity,⁵⁷ intends an apprehension of the real as intelligible, i.e., determined by self-consciousness, all the way to its core. It aims itself at “that goal where it can lay aside the name of *love* of knowledge and be actual *knowledge*.”⁵⁸ Armed with the principle of anticipated synthesis, the absolute, Hegel’s writing proceeds systematically and scientifically toward absolute knowing, toward the concept.

Kierkegaard’s writing is not so armed. Bereft of any principle of anticipated synthesis, *exposed* to the absolute, it cannot aim at the scientific unfolding of knowledge. Exposed to the cut of existence, it must proceed *unscientifically*, which for Kierkegaard means poetically and artistically, with yearning, broken forms sent off as so many vanishing sparks that light up the night of thought with momentary fragments, glimpsed but not possessed, scattered again into the dark.

The rhythm or timing of Hegel’s thought, its feel, its tone, its mood, is something like a heavy march toward a goal, the entire armory of history’s thought in tow. The rhythm or timing of Kierkegaard’s thought, its feel, its tone, its mood, is something like an ebullient dance, which is its own goal, spinning against the way Hegel drives: “I have trained myself and am training myself always to be able to dance lightly in the service of thought, as far as possible to the honor of the god and for my own enjoyment, renouncing domestic bliss and civic esteem, the *communio bonorum* [community of goods] and the concordance of joys that go with having an

⁵⁷ It is an open question whether the synthesis Hegel’s system seeks is actually a further opening, rather than a final closure. The most recent Hegel scholarship has been exploring the possibility of reading Hegel otherwise than as thinker of totality and closure. To my mind, these readings do not render mute Kierkegaard’s protest against Hegel, even if they do require moving beyond certain anti-Hegelian tropes. They enable a deeper reading of Kierkegaard’s own resistance to totality and closure by letting us see that Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelianism is not any kind of simple or pure opposition to Hegel. The real power of Kierkegaard’s difference from Hegel lies not in a direct “what,” a crude opposition of the single individual to the system, for instance. The power lies in *how* Kierkegaard takes up the subject position of the writer otherwise, which at heart involves a different attunement to time, the time of writing. Writing from and toward *Øieblikket* requires a dispossessed writing, a writing that has no principle, a writing that never gets beyond patience.

⁵⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 70.

opinion.”⁵⁹ Rather than catalogue a series of opinions or achieved concepts, Kierkegaard’s authorship traces, as it performs, a series dance steps.

One way to locate the difference between Kierkegaard and Hegel is to ask what each author seeks to move through writing. One way to answer this question is that Hegel seeks to move *the concept* whereas Kierkegaard seeks to move *the heart*. And this makes all the difference. Hegel’s love for the concept moves him in the direction of scientific objectivity, the mediation of truth into an external movement. Kierkegaard’s love for matters of the heart moves him in the direction of artistic upbuilding or edification, which holds open only the *possibility* of truth as a hidden, inward movement to be enacted by *hiin Enkelte*. Hegel uses an organic metaphor to evoke the movement truth: a seed unfolding into the externality of a plant, its hidden inwardness giving way to the mature display of its leaves and flowers.⁶⁰ Kierkegaard uses a different organic metaphor for the movement of truth. He speaks of lettuce that forms “the tender delicacy of the heart and its lovely coil”⁶¹ only *after* it has formed its external leaves. Lettuce matures as it uses its external leaves to hide and protect the formation of its tender and lovely heart. The point of writing and reading, and living, is not to mediate truth externally, allowing all that is implicitly inner to become explicitly outer. “The main point,” Kierkegaard writes, “is rather to speak quite softly with oneself,”⁶² allowing truth to become inwardness, hidden in the coil of one’s heart.

The truth toward which Kierkegaard writes is nothing he can secure or enforce or determine as necessary. That is, he cannot mediate or guarantee its intelligibility for the reader.

⁵⁹ PF, 7.

⁶⁰ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*. trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 22.

⁶¹ WL, 407.

⁶² WL, 407.

He can only present its difficulty, its objective uncertainty, its undecidability, and abide whatever comes. Truth, the truth of *living*, which is the only truth that finally matters, can only come freely, by virtue of the absurd, like the surprise of falling in love, or like an unexpected, uncoerced grief before an enemy's grave. Its spirit is the intimate tilt of the heart, not the grinding necessity of the system's dialectic. Kierkegaard writes:

Everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding...The kind of scholarliness and scientificity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian....It is precisely Christianity's relation to life (in contrast to scholarly distance from life) or the ethical aspect of Christianity that is upbuilding, and the mode of presentation, however rigorous it may be otherwise, is completely different, qualitatively different, from the kind of scientificity and scholarliness that is 'indifferent,' whose lofty heroism is...a kind of inhuman curiosity. It is Christian heroism—a rarity, to be sure—to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility; but it is not Christian heroism to be taken in by the idea of man in the abstract or to play the wonder game with world history.⁶³

For Kierkegaard, the heart is everywhere; it is bigger, deeper, and wider than the concept. More primary than intellection is affect, the sheer shock of existing which gives rise to wonder, anxiety, and joy—all dispossessive attunements, attunements that dispossess the subject from itself. These apophatic attunements are what carry and give life to the movement of thought, not the other way around, which is simply to say that *living* gives life to thought.

v

At stake here is the place and role of passion and affect in thinking and writing—and living. Hegel follows in and consummates the Greek tradition of subordinating the passions to the logos, the concept. The passions are not eradicated in this tradition, but they are to be disciplined into *determinate judgments* that give teleology to affective life. Stoicism is the clearest example of this tendency in Greek thought. The ethical task of living is to order one's thinking rightly, to

⁶³ SUD, 5.

conform one's thinking to the logos, the intelligibility of the world. From this will follow a properly ordered emotional or affective life. One will be attuned to the world rightly in a way that leads to right action, to virtue.

Kierkegaard effects something of a reversal or rupturing of this tradition which identifies the real with the intelligible and therefore regards passion as a dangerous waywardness that needs to be reigned into the bounds of the logos. Rather than seek to determine affect according to the intelligible structure of the logos, Kierkegaard lets thought think out of *indeterminate* affects, attunements, and moods that precede and exceed the determining movement of the concept. He turns the attention of thought to certain dispositions—irony, humor, doubt, boredom, anxiety, despair, devotion, trust, forgiveness, patience, joy—that are disclosive of an excess in reality, an excess that cannot be mediated or speculatively reinscribed.

Kierkegaard's authors, however, resist directly theorizing this excess as an object of thought. This would inevitably reduce it to the bounds of the concept. His authors most often *perform* this excess by reduplicating its exceeding movement into the very forms and movements of their writing. The literary forms and movements of Kierkegaard's authorship rupture, fragment, ironize, elude, restrain, mock, and exceed themselves in multiple ways as various strategies of indirectly indicating and reaching out toward what they cannot contain. To think and write in this way, which is to let thought become nothing but a way or movement, rather than a series of achieved conclusions, is to become a "subjective existing thinker,"⁶⁴ a thinker who thinks *while existing*, while undergoing the "earthquakes of existence"⁶⁵ that cause the ground of thought to tremble.

⁶⁴ CUP, 72.

⁶⁵ FTR, 63.

I'd like to trace how the movement of subjective thinking shows itself in the first book of Kierkegaard's authorship: *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. This will allow me to move through the "stages" of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and how each performs content.

Part 1 of *Either/Or*, which gives voice to "the aesthetic," thinks out of a range of indeterminate affects. Perhaps the most important and telling of these is boredom, which Kierkegaard lets become a site of thought in A's essay "Rotation of the Crops." It is in and through boredom that thought is exposed to "the nothing that interlaces existence,"⁶⁶ to the excess of time, or to time as an excess that surpasses the ability of consciousness to contain it in its representations. Letting thought become bored, letting nothing determinate hold its interest, is how one becomes exposed to what is excessive to thought, namely, time as an infinite opening that cannot be filled up with projects. Projects at some point always become boring. They become exposed to the excess of time they cannot contain. Boredom is therefore an opening toward thinking something other than the project, toward thinking otherwise than as a project. In the face of boredom, thought is pressed to unlearn itself as teleological. It might learn instead *to play*, to sink into, rather than determine, the excess of time offered.

In "Rotation of the Crops," A uses the excess of time to play with, i.e. "rotate," an endless stream of distractions and diversions that allow him to avoid decision and commitment, which he knows will always end in boredom. For example, instead of listening to his boring philosophy professor's boring lecture, A becomes enamored with a bead of sweat that forms and trickles down the professor's nose. The bead of sweat is actually *moving*, whereas the professor

⁶⁶ EO I, 291.

rambles on in a decidedly unmoving way about the supposed “movement” of Hegel’s logic. This desire for real rather than the represented movement—Hegel’s system can only *represent* movement—is repeated in the play of seduction in “The Seducer’s Diary” in which an endless series of erotic objects are seduced, enjoyed once, and then immediately cast aside in order to keep desire moving without succumbing to the boredom and monotony of commitment.

A, however, no more than Hegel’s logic, never really moves, although both *appear* to move, both give a seductive, aesthetic show of movement that is nevertheless not actual movement. This is the irony of A’s irony. “I feel as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved.”⁶⁷ “How sterile my soul and my mind are, and yet constantly tormented by empty voluptuous and excruciating labor pains!”⁶⁸ A never gives birth to actual movement. He only suffers its labor pains, like Hegel’s labor of the negative that produces only an abstract system of labor pains. The movement he produces remains within the womb of self-consciousness and its attempts to master and ground itself. A, one could say, attempts to ground himself in failure, in the failure of becoming a self, the failure to be born. This is a desperate bid at preserving himself otherwise than through the boring project of gaining an identity. It is nevertheless still a gesture of *grounding* that halts actual movement. It is the movement of a self-enclosed consciousness which closes itself off from the will to actual movement, the movement of being born, which is the movement or exposure of consciousness to its outside.

What the aesthetic essays of *Either/Or* dramatize, rather than merely theorize, is the crisis of subjectivity, subjectivity as crisis. This crisis is the subject’s being given always more than it can synthesize within itself, the “always more” that is the movement of time, making synthesis,

⁶⁷ EO I, 22.

⁶⁸ EO I, 24.

the consolidation of oneself into an achieved identity, impossible. This impossibility makes the very attempt at a consolidated self undesirable because the attempt will always leave one bored or in despair, burdened by time's excess. A's desire for endless diversion and distraction is a neurotic defense against becoming a self, to be sure. But his desire also shows something fundamental and enduring about selfhood or subjectivity. By abandoning the project of subjectivity, by letting subjectivity-as-project fail (subjectivity will *absolutely* fail only in the religious, however), A's essays indirectly display or perform the constitutive crisis of subjectivity, its impossibility. To be in existence is to be faced with the impossibility of a consolidated, achieved self. Time is always slicing or tearing the self open, exposing it to an abyssal origin and an undetermined future. A perceives this acutely. He therefore perceives the lie in all bids at identity. This perception is at the heart of his polemics against marriage, friendship, and any institution or project that pretends it can gather and master the excess of time. Time makes life (as project) and the self (as identity) impossible:

What is going to happen? What will the future bring? I do not know, I have no presentiment. When a spider flings itself from a fixed point down into its consequences, it continually sees before it an empty space in which it can find no foothold, however much it stretches. So it is with me; before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me. This life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured.⁶⁹

“I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me”—this is the double-bind of existence in time. To be in time is always to have to choose, to decide, to “fling” oneself in some direction. And yet to choose *in time* is always also to choose what cannot be chosen. To choose in time is to choose, to open oneself to, consequences one cannot calculate, that lie outside of one's anticipative vision, “behind one.” These unanticipatable consequences, the non-calculable excess that haunts all decision making, is what propels existence as an opening, making it move and

⁶⁹ EO I, 24.

twist beyond anyone's control. This makes life dreadful. The self must move through life with its back toward the future. The future opens always behind one, in an instant, prior to the consolidating reach or phenomenological intentionality of consciousness, and therefore without knowledge. "Before I knew it..." one says of undergoing a surprise, a break, the sudden opening of time. The self is always hurtling blindly it knows not where, toward and within a gaping opening, within "empty space."

Judge Wilhem's response to A in Part II of *Either/Or*, the response of "the ethical," is to appeal to and argue for a certain kind of consolidation of the self that is both possible and desirable. The Judge knows, however, that a naïvely affirmed or simply assumed self is an impossibility, and therefore the ethical does not simply negate the lessons of the aesthetic. It "sublates" the aesthetic by working with the impossibility of the self differently. Rather than defend against the self's impossibility as A does through distraction and diversion, the Judge aims to face the impossibility of the self as an infinite *task*, a task whose form is "repetition," a ceaseless renewal of the will to move toward the infinite telos that the self is. The Judge knows that time does indeed space the self out from itself, infinitely. But unlike A, the Judge takes up the ethical call to traverse this spacing and in that traversing to become present to oneself, not as a stable or quantifiable "thing," but as a patterned and disciplined movement across time that has its own "aesthetic" appeal. This disciplined, patterned movement across time—"actuality," actual movement—is paradigmatically enacted in marriage, which is the earnest decision of two people to unite together across time in pursuit of an infinite telos.

For the Judge, the self becomes a patterned movement by virtue of "duty" or law, the very law he represents as a judge. Duty is a mediation into time of "the eternal," the eternal value of one's decisions in time. It is by virtue of duty or law that the crisis of subjectivity becomes

livable, its impossibility made possible as a task or striving. Duty allows a consolidation of the self. By grounding oneself in duty the impossible gulf between the present moment and the next, the impossibility of facing the future on which A is wrecked, is bridged. The way across the gulf is opened. By way of duty one can anticipate one's next move, the future can come into view, possibility can become actuality, and the self can receive historical concretion. The agony of decision is relieved, and the ghosts of undecidability are banished. One can translate oneself into social readability and recognizability and so become a grounded human being with a respectable name, identity, pattern of desire, and ethical telos, like Judge Wilhelm, rather than remain a nameless spider floating in empty space, like A.

The ethical marks a "higher" form of subjectivity than the aesthetic insofar as it is capable of actual movement. It is not the highest, however. The ethical subject still faces the impossibility of the self with a "why," with the purpose of discovering its own infinite capacity as a willing, ethical agent. For Judge Wilhelm, as for Kant, the impossible ethical ideal appropriated within the self effects a grounding of the subject in itself by enabling the endless striving of duty. The infinite is translated into a posit of the ethically grounded subject.

The brief ending of *Either/Or*, which speaks on behalf of neither the *Either* nor the *Or*, explodes this grounding of the subject, and the whole book along with it. It gathers all preceding 800 pages into a tightly packed stick of sermonic dynamite, lights the fuse, and walks away. *Either/Or* ends by unsaying itself in an apophatic gesture, one performed without being directly announced, the gesture of speaking in praise of love as an indeterminate affect, an infinite roominess that desires never to be in the right, never to be the Judge.

After Judge Wilhem's appeal to A, *Either/Or* ends with an "Ultimatum," with a written yet unpreached sermon by a nameless pastor titled, "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought

That In Relation To God We Are Always in the Wrong.” This sermon is a brief but decisive turn to “the religious.” Its theme is the “upbuilding,” the “joy,” of being always in the wrong. What is crucial to grasp about this sermon is how being “in the wrong” has nothing to do with morality, with a failure to conform to a determinate moral or ethical code. Wrongness, for the pastor, signifies the self’s “perfection”⁷⁰ rather than some lack. It is a quasi-ontological category. And yet, to speak the language of ontology here is also “wrong.” The message of the sermon is how joyful it is that existence cannot be determined, i.e., put in the right, by any principle whatsoever—ethical, moral, or ontological. Existence before God is “more superabundant than any measure,”⁷¹ it “tears up the accounting”⁷² that would seek to calculate life as a pursuit of finite end-goals, like being “in the right.” The sermon writes existence into an excess, the excess of love that is God.

What exceeds any determination is the movement of infinite desire, the movement of stretching out toward the excess of love that is God. At its heart, the sermon is about the “how” of loving God, “the longing with which one seeks God,”⁷³ a seeking which makes the “spirit glow”⁷⁴ with “the deep inner motion...the heart’s indescribable emotion.”⁷⁵ To elucidate this longing, the sermon unfolds a paradoxical phenomenology of love’s desire. It traces the movement whereby love exceeds its own movement toward finite objects, opening itself toward the divine, by way of the desire always to find itself in the wrong. The sermon rests on the counter-intuitive insight that love delights in and draws strength from being in the wrong, that

⁷⁰ EO II, 344.

⁷¹ EO II, 349.

⁷² EO II, 348.

⁷³ EO II, 353.

⁷⁴ EO II, 353.

⁷⁵ EO II, 354.

only in being in the wrong is love free and uncoerced. And only before God is one *infinitely* in the wrong and therefore “infinitely free.”⁷⁶

The core phenomenological observation is that the position of being “in the right” in relation to one’s beloved is an impoverished and anxious position, bereft of love’s joy and confidence. Love desires never to gain the upper hand or be in the right over against the beloved. This would introduce a kind of measure or calculation into the movement of love. And calculation signals love’s death, its reduction to something finite. The moment one finds oneself in the right over against one’s beloved, perhaps because of some sort of injury they have caused or wrong they have done, or because one wills oneself into the right out of arrogance or perhaps fear, love becomes an external relation ruled by calculation and law rather than an inward relation of desire. To be in the right, either by choice or by necessity, is to occupy a determinate position outside of the inward freedom of love’s longing, which has no measure, no law, no condition. Love never wants to find itself in a determinate, fixed position, which would be a kind of closure. To love, therefore, is to desire never to be in the right, never to be hemmed into a position, no matter how right, over against one’s beloved. Love transgresses the integrity that in the name of rightness keeps one from the beloved.⁷⁷ Love desires itself as infinite rather than as finite, as an “empty space” (to use A’s language) that never ceases to open for the other. “Love takes everything,”⁷⁸ it opens itself to the beloved with an infinite embrace.

⁷⁶ EO II, 352.

⁷⁷ This transgression of the law of rightness is what Kierkegaard will call “forgiveness,” the love that hides a multitude of sins. In 1843, the same year Kierkegaard published *Either/Or*, he published two upbuilding discourses with the title “Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins.” The logic of these discourses is profoundly apophatic. Love holds no determinate position. Love is an open embrace that welcomes all determinations, even those of sin, in order to unsay them by releasing them into an open future.

⁷⁸ EUD, 74.

In an “infinite relationship”⁷⁹ there is never a moment when the gift of the beloved has been fully received, and this “never,” this excess of the other, is one’s unrightable “wrongness,” which is equally one’s “perfection,” one’s calling to open oneself to the infinite gift of the other. To respond endlessly to the infinite gift of the other, always “wrongly” because there is always more to receive, always more room to be made, is to be upbuilt by love’s excess.

Why did you wish to be in the wrong in relation to a person? Because you loved. Why did you find it upbuilding? Because you loved. The more you loved, the less time you had to deliberate upon whether or not you were in the right; your love had only one desire, that you might continually be in the wrong.⁸⁰

Of course, in relation to another finite human being, there will always come moments in which one finds oneself or the beloved in the right, in which circumstance—*time*—intervenes and ruptures the inward freedom of love’s longing only to be in the wrong. This is the frailty of human love in time, its fallibility, uncertainty, and instability. In the face of this uncertainty, this lack of guarantee that haunts love’s freedom, one could turn *either* to despairing self-enclosure, which is what A does, *or* to the grounding and stability provided by duty, which was is what Judge Wilhelm does.

The nameless pastor, however, in the face of the uncertainty of existence opts for neither the *Either* nor the *Or*. He writes himself instead into the nameless excess of God’s love that ungrounds the position of the self-grounding subject, which both A and Judge Wilhelm represent. This excess relativizes even duty and the pleasures of identity it offers. It opens onto a source of bottomless joy that explodes the consolidated and finite joy of recognition, a joy that is inherently anxious because it can always be lost in the vicissitudes of time. The pastor writes:

If your wish were what others and you yourself in a certain sense must call your duty, if you not only had to deny your wish but in a way betray your duty, if you lost not only

⁷⁹ EO II, 348.

⁸⁰ EO II, 349.

your joy but even your honor, you are still happy—in relation to God, you say: I am always in the wrong.⁸¹

The real either/or of *Either/Or* is the difference between a grounded subject and an ungrounded one. *Either* you hold onto yourself and strive to be in the right in the face of time's uncertainty, which will only produce endless anxiety, *or* you let go.

God is the “how” of this letting go, its event, its happening, its gift. God, for the pastor, is not some metaphysical “rightness” “out there” that objectively puts one in the wrong. If such were the case there would be nothing upbuilding in being in the wrong because one would “be forced to acknowledge that God is always in the right,”⁸² and being forced to do anything is the opposite of being upbuilt. Only freedom is upbuilding, only that which comes “from the love within you”⁸³ builds up. “There is nothing upbuilding in acknowledging that God is always in the right, and consequently there is nothing upbuilding in any thought that necessarily follows from it. When you acknowledge that God is always in the right, you stand outside God, and likewise when, as a conclusion from that, you acknowledge that you are always in the wrong.”⁸⁴

What the pastor is describing here, one could say, is the despair of onto-theology. There is nothing upbuilding, nothing freeing, about God as the grounding posit of metaphysical or ethical reason that proceeds from the axiom of God's inviolable rightness. This places God “outside,” out there, as a highest being, despairingly distant. Infinite love that desires only to be in the wrong relates to God otherwise. It does not relate to God as a grounding ground, or as any kind of separate entity: “But when you do not claim and are not convinced by virtue of any previous acknowledgement that you are always in the wrong, then you are hidden in God.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ EO II, 353.

⁸² EO II, 350.

⁸³ EO II, 350.

⁸⁴ EO II, 350.

⁸⁵ EO II, 350.

God is not an external standard over against which one is in the wrong. One is in the wrong by being *in* God. God is this: that one is always in the wrong:

You did not arrive at the certainty that you were in the wrong from the acknowledgement that God was in the right, but from love's sole and supreme wish, that you might always be in the wrong, you arrived at the acknowledgement that God is always in the right. But this wish is love's wish and consequently a matter of freedom, and you were by no means forced to acknowledged that you were always in the wrong. Thus it was not through deliberation that you become certain that you were always in the wrong, but the certainty was due to your being built up by it.⁸⁶

To sink into God as a sinking into one's wrongness is to receive the gift of one's freedom, a receiving that the pastor calls "adoration."⁸⁷ In God, existence opens as an astonishing event of freedom, the freedom to love without the anxiety of striving to be in the right.

There is a sense in which God "is always in the right," of course. But the radical, paradoxical point to grasp is that one's wrongness *precedes* God's rightness. God's rightness is the rightness, the joy, the blessedness, *of one's wrongness*: "from love's sole and supreme wish, that you might always be in the wrong, you arrived at the acknowledgement that God is always in the right."⁸⁸ God's rightness is not a metaphysical "thing in itself." God's rightness, rather, is an originary affirmation of the self in its relation to an absolute incommensurability that keeps the self limitlessly open, an open-*ing*. God's *love*, the love that God is, which loves nothings and nobodies, is this incommensurability, this absolute: "And then should not the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong be inspiring, for what else does it express but that God's love is always greater than our love?"⁸⁹ "And was it not your bliss that you could never love as you were loved?"⁹⁰ God's rightness is nothing but the self's being so excessively loved

⁸⁶ EO II, 350.

⁸⁷ EO II, 350.

⁸⁸ EO II, 350.

⁸⁹ EO II, 353.

⁹⁰ EO II, 351.

prior to any achieved rightness so as to be placed forever in the wrong, outside any economy of calculated rightness. What ungrounds the self is that in God it is infinitely, unconditionally loved, adored, and held and therefore it is free to let go of the project of grounding itself. It is free to be in the wrong and in that freedom the self can turn and open itself to the other.

God, one could say, is the love through which one loves oneself as an infinite opening capable of welcoming the other, absolutely. The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me, as Eckhart puts it. It is only by loving oneself infinitely, which means loving oneself absolutely prior to anything one might achieve or become, loving oneself *as nothing*, as sheerly given, which is to love oneself in God, that one is freed to love the other as other and not as a tool in the project of grounding the self. To love oneself as nothing rather than as something is to absolve oneself from the anxiety of calculation and identity, of the calculated pursuit of an identity. It is to place oneself infinitely “in the wrong,” beyond even the possibility of being “in the right.”

This is freedom, a freedom that redoubles into boundless joy and bold self-confidence in loving, the confidence that comes only when there is nothing left to lose because there is nothing but the nothing of God’s love: “In relation to God we are always in the wrong—this thought puts an end to doubt and calms the cares; it animates and inspires to action.”⁹¹ Loved absolutely, prior to any rightness, the self is freed to love absolutely, in the joyful roominess of wrongness. To be animated with a love that moves without doubt, without care, without the anxiety of being in the right, is *to play*. In God, one is free to play with the excess of time, with the timing, the rhythm, of love. This is to remain a child rather than become a judge, “always ready to keep eternally

⁹¹ EO II, 353.

young the love with which one loves God—eternally young as God is eternal, in the first tension of passion, but more and more inwardly.”⁹²

My reading of the stages here breaks from teleological readings, that is, from readings that regard the movement from the aesthetic, through the ethical, to the religious as a movement of self-realization in which the self progressively gathers itself into itself as a movement of determination. Mark C. Taylor is a representative of these readings when he writes, “At the Christian stage of existence Kierkegaard argues that the self achieves the balance within itself that has been the goal of the entire quest of self.”⁹³ On my reading, religiousness is rather a dispossession or breaking open of the self, a movement out into its groundlessness, a becoming nothing, in which “achievement,” “balance,” “goal,” “quest,” and even “self” are *undone*.

Kangas puts it like this:

If the religious acquires a priority in Kierkegaard’s texts—and no doubt it does—this is not because the subject realizes therein the implicit telos of its existence. On the contrary, it is because the subject finally discovers the representational or egological status of every telos. A telos is something inevitably posited or mediated by consciousness; it has the ontological status of a representation. Yet the religious is the name for the referral of the subject to, and its holding itself open for, the infinite beginning, the instant of coming-into-existence, which it can neither posit nor recollect. It coincides with the subject’s impossibility to take itself as origin, ground, absolute beginning (as still happens in both the aesthetic and the ethical). This is exactly why the texts . . . link the religious to the ‘impossible,’ to ‘the ordeal,’ and refuse to regard it as the *outcome* of a process for which the subject constitutes the origin. If one insists upon teleology, then one could say that the telos of human existence, the point at which it becomes religious, is the abandonment of every telos. The abandonment of every telos is the *absolute* telos. One possesses only in agreeing not to possess.⁹⁴

⁹² CD, 199.

⁹³ Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 74.

⁹⁴ Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, p. 8.

It is because of this ungrounding of the subject that the religious bends back around to resonate and rhyme with the aesthetic. What the aesthetic and the religious share is non-teleological passion, a tension without intension, “the first tension of passion”⁹⁵ that redoubles back into itself as a nameless excess that refuses identity, which is why both A and the pastor have no names, no identity. The difference of the religious is that it refuses identity *absolutely*. This is an abandon in which the gift of selfhood (as opposed to identity) is infinitely received, whereas the aesthetic refuses identity only within an attempted self-grounding. The latter is despair. The former is bottomless joy.

vi

Any account of Kierkegaard as an author has to come to terms with the issue of pseudonymity, one of the more elusive, and therefore apophatic, aspects of the authorship. All that I have said thus far touches on this issue, but let me turn my attention to it directly.

Kierkegaard’s authorial voice is dispersed across seventeen pseudonymous personas: Victor Eremita, A, Judge William, A.F., Hilarious Bookbinder, William Afham, Johannes de Silentio, Constantine Constantius, Vigilius Haufniensis, Nicholas Notabene, A.B.C.D.E.F Godthaab (Rosenbald), Inter et Inter, Procul, Frater Taciturnus, Johannes Climacus, H.H., and Anti-Climacus. With regard to these pseudonyms, often there is a desire in commentators to locate the “real” and authoritative voice of Søren Kierkegaard, to isolate and pin down what the author behind all the masks really thought about things. I regard this approach as unfruitful. It does not, it seems to me, ask the most important questions about pseudonymity. I read the authorship with all of its pseudonyms as staging an apophatic problematic. The authorship is a multi-voiced discourse in which there is no authoritative voice *anywhere*, not even when the man

⁹⁵ CD, 199.

we call “Kierkegaard” signs that name to texts, because all the voices in the authorship arise of out an exposure to what none of them can capture or authoritatively mediate. This is not simply the post-structuralist claim that there is nothing behind the dispersal of the grammatical subject or that language endlessly refers only to itself. This is at heart a negatively theological claim about the nature of writing before the unnamable God whose name, like Kierkegaard’s authorial voice, is endlessly determinable.

I regard the principal function of the pseudonyms as a way to signal indirection, that is, to signal the scene of writing as a communication of subjectivity. Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms are subjectivities in the movement of communication, and what they are communicating is subjectivity, the possibility of subjectivity for the reader.⁹⁶ This constitutes the whole authorship as apophatic insofar as subjectivity as such cannot be said, cannot be communicated directly or authoritatively. “All its essential content is a secret, because it cannot be communicated directly.”⁹⁷ Subjectivity is the lived or spirited synthesis of finitude and infinitude, time and eternity, in the existing individual that eludes any direct representation, any final synthesis. Any objective content of the authorship that can be apprehended directly is therefore not itself the point. Objective content is set in motion, off itself, across the chasm of silence between the author and the single individual who reads, who in reading is not present as an objective telos but “continually desires only to be as one absent on a journey.”⁹⁸ In this passing, objective content

⁹⁶ JP, 6440: “All communication of truth has become abstract; the public has become the authority; the newspapers call themselves the editorial staff; the professor calls himself speculation; the pastor is mediation—no one, none, dares to say *I*. But since without qualification the first prerequisite for the communication of truth is personality, since ‘truth’ cannot possibly be served by ventriloquism, personality had to come to fore again. But in these circumstances, since the world was so corrupted by never hearing an *I*, it was impossible to begin at once with one’s own *I*. So it became my task to create author-personalities and let them enter into the actuality of life in order to get people a bit more accustomed to hearing discourse in the first person. Thus my task is no doubt only that of a forerunner until the one comes who in the strictest sense says: *I*. But to make a turn away from this inhuman abstraction to personality—that is my task.”

⁹⁷ CUP, 79

⁹⁸ EUD, 179.

disappears and unsays its objectivity. Writing that respects this chasm of silence and difference—the very space of relation—and the absent reader who journeys, as all of Kierkegaard’s writing does, is “doubly reflected,” already letting go of itself as it becomes itself, becoming itself *by* letting go of itself.

This requires that one not set up an absolute distinction between the pseudonymous and the signed texts. Pseudonyms *signal* indirection, but the lack of a pseudonym does not mean a lack of indirection.⁹⁹ Kierkegaard does not come out of hiding in the edifying, upbuilding, and deliberative discourses that he signs with his own name. Just the opposite: his writing, as he says in a preface to a collection of such discourses, enters a “hiding place in the great forest.”¹⁰⁰ It “remains in secret.”¹⁰¹ He does not produce in these works summarizable content meant to reassure us of his orthodoxy, or of anything else. He produces writing that even before a “shut door”¹⁰² cannot be contained or forced to explain itself directly. The writing “slips through, since it shifts for itself and goes its way and tends to its errand and discerns its own enigmatic path.”¹⁰³ Considered directly, it is but “mute letters” that are “unable to express”¹⁰⁴ what they long for. The letters are “captive thoughts that long for release” with “stammering and stuttering.”¹⁰⁵ Only the single individual who “reads aloud to himself”¹⁰⁶ can release what is held captive in the

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard does refer to some of his texts, particularly the later religious ones, as “direct communication.” This does not negate the point that the whole authorship is indirect. “Direct communication” is a different kind of indirect communication, if I may put it that way, one in which the indirect communication of religious subjectivity is more directly the aim.

¹⁰⁰ EUD, 5.

¹⁰¹ EUD, 5.

¹⁰² EUD, 53.

¹⁰³ EUD, 53.

¹⁰⁴ EUD, 53.

¹⁰⁵ EUD, 53.

¹⁰⁶ EUD, 53.

writing. Such a reader “breaks the spell on the letters, with his voice summons forth what the mute letters have on their lips.”¹⁰⁷

Absent a reader for whom it comes alive subjectively, Kierkegaard’s signed writings are a collection of mute letters that only stutter and stammer. Meaning breaks through only in the inwardness of the single individual, never externally for “the crowd.” Meaning, or truth, is therefore always elusive, never objective, always a gift, never a possession. The reader Kierkegaard longs for is “that favorably disposed person who receives the book and gives it a good home, that favorably disposed person who in receiving it does for it by himself and by his acceptance what the temple box by itself did for the widow’s mite: sanctifies the gift, gives it meaning, and transforms it into much.”¹⁰⁸

The signed writings, therefore, withhold direct and finalized content no less than pseudonymous writings. Kierkegaard in fact acknowledges that his own name is a pseudonym: “This is my limitation—I am a pseudonym.”¹⁰⁹ His signed discourses also wink at his reader, approaching only by withdrawing, looking only by turning away. They aim not at a scientific or descriptive “result” but at an “overturning of thought and speech.”¹¹⁰ Writing about the “deliberations” [*Overveielse*] that make up *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes that his aim is to paint a world governed by the logic of paradox that will “awaken and provoke people and sharpen thought.”¹¹¹ A deliberation is a “gadfly.”¹¹² It is “impatient, high-spirited in mood.”¹¹³ It aims to startle the mind and heart. Therefore: “irony is necessary here and the even more significant ingredient of the comic. One may very well even laugh once in a while, if only to

¹⁰⁷ EUD, 53.

¹⁰⁸ EUD, 107.

¹⁰⁹ JP, 6505

¹¹⁰ EUD, 162.

¹¹¹ JP, 641

¹¹² JP, 641

¹¹³ JP, 641

make the thought clearer and more striking.”¹¹⁴ A deliberation desires to “fetch [readers] up out of the cellar, call to them, turn their comfortable way of thinking topsy-turvy with the dialectic of truth.”¹¹⁵

Simply registering *that* the pseudonyms signal indirection does not exhaust the issue of pseudonymity. *How* any given pseudonym signals indirection must be determined locally in each text. Different pseudonyms signal indirection differently, depending on what point of view toward existence they are opening. Let me take three examples: Kierkegaard, Johannes Climacus, and Constantine Constantius.

Kierkegaard enacts indirection by writing for “that single individual” [*hiin Enkelte*] and by prefacing his discourses with prayers. This forms his discourse as address, as sent beyond itself, emptying itself of claims to possess its own meaning and truth. Kierkegaard’s writing has meaning only for another, not in itself. It is “nothing for itself and by itself, but all that it is, it is only for [the reader] and by [the reader].”¹¹⁶ Writing before God and for *hiin Enkelte*, Kierkegaard’s language could be described as an act of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “adoration,”¹¹⁷ speaking (*-oration*) toward (*ad-*) the other, the other who exists for God and not for Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard adores his reader, whom he continually refers to as “my reader” and “my lover.”¹¹⁸ He offers his writing to *hiin Enkelte* as a self-emptying gift that desires to set

¹¹⁴ JP, 641

¹¹⁵ JP, 641

¹¹⁶ EUD, 295.

¹¹⁷ Nancy, *Adoration*.

¹¹⁸ There is strong evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard viewed Regine as the primary reader for whom he was writing. In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard writes, “The dedication to Regine Schlegel, if there can be such a thing during my *lifetime*, could very well be used in the front of a small collection of Friday discourses but properly belongs to the writings on my work as an author. Inasmuch as I appear so decisively in the character of the religious, which I have wanted from the very beginning, at this moment *she* is the only important one, since my relationship to her is a *God*-relationship.” Regine is *hiin Enkelte*, that single individual that Kierkegaard longs for. This does not exclude other readers, other single individuals as the intended audience of his writing. It only indicates that Kierkegaard aims to address each of his readers with the same affection, longing, gratitude, and hope that he felt toward Regine.

the reader free. Writing toward the reader's opening before God, Kierkegaard's discourses aim to release the reader from dependence upon the author into "the infinite remoteness of separation"¹¹⁹ where, before God, the author as authority is "infinitely forgotten."¹²⁰ Kierkegaard's writing longs to set its reader free, free for her or his own life before God that no objectivity could capture. "It *adores* this letting be."¹²¹

An edifying or upbuilding discourse is therefore an outgoing that seeks no safe return, and this is why it is edifying. It "goes out like a messenger, but not like a messenger who comes back again."¹²² Its "trail always leads ahead to *my* reader, not back, and...the messenger never returns home."¹²³ Kierkegaard never knows what his writing will have meant. He leaves its meaning in the hands of the unknown reader. This self-emptying, unknowing writing toward the other is not a resignation to a lack of meaning. It is the "joy" of writing before the elusiveness of God with "fantastic hope"¹²⁴:

Although the one who sends [the messenger] never discovers anything about his fate, the next messenger nevertheless goes intrepidly through death to life, cheerfully goes its way in order to disappear, happy never to return home again—and this is precisely the joy of him who sends it, who continually comes to his reader only to bid him farewell.¹²⁵

Kierkegaard's writing is sent out "in order to disappear," in order to go "through death," the death of any objective, closed meaning. The writing comes "to life" only in the existence of *hiin Enkelte*, whose life's meaning will never be fully known or accounted for, even to itself, always eluding capture and finality before the hope-giving elusiveness of God.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ UDVS, 5.

¹²⁰ UDVS, 5.

¹²¹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 136.

¹²² EUD, 295.

¹²³ EUD, 295.

¹²⁴ EUD, 5.

¹²⁵ EUD, 295.

¹²⁶ What Kierkegaard regards as the specific vocation of an upbuilding discourse, namely, to go through death in order to come to life in the reader's lived existence, bears essential resemblances to Derrida's understanding of the structure of writing as such. Derrida writes, "Like every trace, a book, the survivance of a book, from its first

Kierkegaard's writing is in this sense a work of love. It "stretches out its arms"¹²⁷ to its reader "because one goes to the person one loves, makes one's home with him, and remains with him if this is allowed."¹²⁸ This is "the *book's* joyous *giving of itself*."¹²⁹ Adoring its reader through God, Kierkegaard's writing *prays*, it prays that it will fall on listening ears and be met with "appropriation, and the appropriation is the *reader's* even greater, is his triumphant *giving of himself*."¹³⁰ To appropriate or become attentive to the truth toward which Kierkegaard writes is not to close down on or possess some definite content. It is to become expropriated unto God, given over to a movement of communicating in which joy, gratitude, and adoration before the other exceeds all articulable meaning.

Philosophical pseudonyms, who are not as pious as Kierkegaard, tend to enact indirection by mocking their own efforts. Johannes Climacus does this sublimely. He takes Shakespeare's line, "Better well hanged than ill wed," as his authorial slogan. Better to have one's book "unnoticed...not...reviewed, not mentioned, anywhere; no literary clangor...no scholarly outcry...no shouting about it" that would bring "the citizenry of the reading world to their feet."¹³¹ To be ignored is much better than to have one's book greeted with "cannons mounted and fuses lit, with fireworks and illuminated banner in readiness; some with the town hall festively decorated, the reception committee all dressed up, speeches ready; some with the dipped pen of systematic urgency and the dictation notebook wide open in anticipation of the

moment on, is a living-dead machine, sur-viving, the body of a thing buried in a library, a bookstore, a cellars, urns, drowned in the world-wide waves of a Web, etc., but a dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading, each time a breath of the other or the other breath, each time an intentionality intends it and makes it live again by animating it..." *The Beast and Sovereign: Volume II*. trans. Geoffry Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 131.

¹²⁷ EUD, 5.

¹²⁸ EUD, 295.

¹²⁹ TDIO, 5.

¹³⁰ TDIO, 5.

¹³¹ CUP, 5-6.

arrival of the promised one.”¹³² Rather than respond to doting admirers and annoyingly earnest readers who are “disturbing interventions”¹³³ into his “personal freedom,”¹³⁴ Climacus prefers to “loung[e] undisturbed in his living room, smoke his cigar, busy himself with his thoughts, jest with his beloved, make himself comfortable in his robe, sleep soundly.”¹³⁵ Perhaps then he can write another book in peace and quiet. One is reminded of “The Dude” in the Cohen brother’s film *The Big Lebowski*—“takin’ ‘er easy for all us sinners.” Climacus prefers “the negative” to “the positive,” because “the negative is not an intervention, but only the positive.”¹³⁶ Positive speech, such as admiration, suffocates and obligates and negates freedom. Negative speech, speech that negates and therefore doesn’t wed itself to objective content and “hip-hip-hurrah”¹³⁷ success, grants freedom.

How, then, is the reader to read *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*? What kind of book is this? In the subtitle, we are told that it is a *Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation: An Existential Contribution*. It is a big, dense book that covers vast dialectical territory. But it doesn’t do so systematically or with tight-lipped discursivity that knows exactly where it is going. It takes its time. It plays with time’s excess. “We do have plenty of time,” Climacus writes, “because what I write is not the awaited final paragraph that will complete the system.”¹³⁸ The *Postscript* saunters and swags across 600 pages, not bothering to take off its robe and don more respectable clothes. It is content to wander and ponder slowly while it puffs a cigar and

¹³² CUP, 5.

¹³³ CUP, 6.

¹³⁴ CUP, 7.

¹³⁵ CUP, 7.

¹³⁶ CUP, 8.

¹³⁷ CUP, 8.

¹³⁸ CUP, 77.

recounts fantastic, sobering, and hilarious scenes. Its aim is not to problem-solve or make anything easier. It wants only “to make difficulties everywhere.”¹³⁹

The *Postscript* signals over and over in both subtle and not so subtle ways that its objective content is not itself the point. Most bluntly, Climacus revokes the whole book as its concluding gesture. He writes that “everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot.”¹⁴⁰ How does one “go on” from a book that completely unsays itself? What sort of response or answer does it invite? By revoking his book, Climacus leaves the way forward objectively uncertain. There is no necessary or obvious way to “go on.” Climacus has no interest in winning readers to an intellectual or religious cause or in setting up a tightly bounded and policed field of discourse. He only wishes to make clear the *difficulty* of going on toward Christian religiousness. And the worst possible thing, for Climacus, would be to force this difficulty upon someone or tell them how to face it. Each reader must decide for themselves how to go on, how life is to become difficult *for them*. The possibilities for the meanings and effects of Climacus’ book are therefore unspeakably numerous and untameably diverse, as numerous and diverse as the single individuals who read it. By revoking his book, he makes way for the meanings and effects that the book might produce but that the book itself cannot say. The *Postscript* does not police its own meaning.

Perhaps Kierkegaard’s most wildly un-policed text is *Repetition: A Venture In Experimenting Psychology*, the companion piece to *Fear and Trembling*. It was written by Constantine Constantius “without any philosophical pretension, a droll little book, dashed off as

¹³⁹ CUP, 187.

¹⁴⁰ CUP, 619.

an oddity.”¹⁴¹ The book seeks to communicate “repetition” as a category that is at once aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Repetition, however, is not a *concept*, or it is a concept that negates itself as a concept. It is a “task,” specifically, “a task for freedom”—“it signifies freedom itself...upon which metaphysics comes to grief.”¹⁴² Constantine therefore writes not “in a scientific-scholarly way, still less in scientific-scholarly way in the sense that every teller in our philosophical bank could count 1, 2, 3.”¹⁴³ He aims to let the untameability of life interrupt the smooth accrual of intellectual capital:

Just as on the street one hears the minutest portions of a solitary flute player’s performance, and almost instantly the rattle of the carriages and the noise of traffic make it necessary even for the Amager hawker to shout loudly so that the madame standing there can hear the price of her kale, and then for a brief instant it is quiet and one again hears the flute player, just so...[*Repetition*] is continually interrupted by the noise of life.¹⁴⁴

“Repetition” [*Gjentagelse*] is intended as a critical undoing of Hegelian “mediation.” It names the movement of *life* that exceeds than the movement of the concept.¹⁴⁵ *Gjentagelse* therefore does not get determined with any kind of stability or finality in this text, just as life itself can never be determined with any kind of stability or finality. This indetermination of the text’s central category, this *freedom*, is at the heart of its critical gesture vis-à-vis mediation, a gesture that critiques indirectly through performance. One cannot simply assert indetermination or freedom as a direct position over against determination. This would be to determine the

¹⁴¹ FTR, 324.

¹⁴² FTR, 324.

¹⁴³ FTR, 302.

¹⁴⁴ FTR, 303.

¹⁴⁵ FTR, 321: “Although in our age movement, under the name of mediation, has even been taken into logic, where everything nevertheless lies within immanence and where now again under the name of mediation movements in the sphere of the spirit are changed to mere immanences, the main point is to see that movement belongs specifically in the world of spirit, where repetition means more than mediation precisely because it always has a transcendence behind it, which is definitely and clearly indicated in the characterizations used in the essential discussion of repetition in my book: that it is transcendent, religious, a movement by virtue of the absurd.”

freedom of indetermination. Indetermination must be “performed” indirectly as the very open-endedness of determination.

Repetition is such a performance. It refuses to mediate *Gjentagelse*, to determine it scientifically across a dialectical unfolding that arrives at the finalization of a concept. Rather, *Gjentagelse* is non-identically repeated across a range of unsystematically related performances that sprout throughout the book like “wild trees.”¹⁴⁶ Constantine’s return trip to Berlin, at the heart of which is his return to the theater, at the heart of which is a performance of farce, which is a performance of indetermination; additionally, a certain young man’s poetic re-discovery of himself, his exchange of letters with Constantine, and even the repeated blowing of a stagecoach horn with its “infinite possibilities”¹⁴⁷—each of these is an instance of *Gjentagelse*. *Gjentagelse* is disseminated into multiple guises that “constantly run around in the book and create confusion.”¹⁴⁸

And yet none of these repetitions is truly *Gjentagelse* because none of them is *religious* repetition, which is repetition in the “pregnant sense.”¹⁴⁹ This is the fundamental indetermination of the text, *its* farce. It progressively moves through multiple determinations of “repetition” toward the possibility of religious repetition, parodying the Hegelian movement of the concept. But Constantine’s text leaves off the decisive, absolute moment, the moment in which the concept becomes fully determined and articulable. Repetition does not happen in the text. It goes unsaid. One can only *wait* for repetition. This is the book’s decisive, if also elusive, gesture of critique. Religious repetition *cannot happen within the frames of discourse*. Like mediation, repetition names a movement, but not a movement into speech. It is a lived movement that takes

¹⁴⁶ FTR, 127.

¹⁴⁷ FTR, 175.

¹⁴⁸ FTR, 320.

¹⁴⁹ FTR, 312.

place in an inwardness where thought and language cannot go. *Repetition*, through the indetermination and dispersal, one could say failure, of its central category, says this inwardness by unsaying, writes it by unwriting.

vii

I want to conclude this chapter by asking the following: what kind of apophasis have I been tracing throughout Kierkegaard's writing? William Franke identifies two main streams of apophasis in Western discourse, one "extralinguistic" the other "intralinguistic."¹⁵⁰ Franke writes, "they are based, respectively, on the unsayability inherent in being and on the unsayability inherent in language."¹⁵¹ The first finds its origin in the Greeks: "it developed in Neoplatonic discourses revolving around the One that Logos cannot comprehend. This One is the supreme source of Being as such and therewith also of all beings throughout the universe. Yet it remains inaccessible to every effort of knowledge by means of the Logos: it is the ineffable par excellence."¹⁵² The second finds its origin "in the problematic of the unnameability of God as it devolves from Jewish interpretations of the Torah and, following them, from Christian and Muslim meditations on the revelation of the divine Names."¹⁵³ In this second stream, "language itself is the starting point, and the divine Name stands as the ineffable instance at the source and core of language."¹⁵⁴ The Greek approach finds the unsayable lying beyond language, whereas the Jewish approach finds the unsayable right in the midst of language, at its very origin.

These two streams, however, do not remain separate. Throughout Western history they are found "intersecting and interpenetrating."¹⁵⁵ Franke writes:

¹⁵⁰ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 133.

¹⁵¹ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 132.

¹⁵² Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 132.

¹⁵³ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 132.

¹⁵⁴ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 132-3.

¹⁵⁵ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 133.

Greek Neoplatonic speculation on the ineffable One-Nothing and Jewish, Kabbalistic theology of the unutterable divine Name have been tangled together all through Western intellectual tradition. Just as being and language are mutually relative terms, so also the absolute of what cannot be said in the register of either being or language emerges in complementary fashion from the parallel reading of these two apophatic oeuvres.¹⁵⁶

Kierkegaard's writing, I want to claim, is a potent mix of both Greek and Jewish modes of apophasis. If one abstracts the metaphysical and ontological presuppositions of his discourse one finds, as I argued in the introduction, a relocation of the Neoplatonic problematic of the One, now identified by Kierkegaard as "that one" [*hiin Enkelte*], the single individual. *Hiin Enkelte* is ineffable in its utter concreteness and absolute singularity. The single individual is where existence redoubles itself into singularities that withdraw from and elude the frames of language, which inevitably generalize and abstract. The unsayable One, for Kierkegaard, is met in every face. Yet if one approaches Kierkegaard's discourse with a view to the performative force and elusiveness of its forms, as I have tried to do in this chapter, one finds the unsayable "beyond" happening right in the midst of language as it endlessly and hyperbolically opens itself, straining to respond to a silent, originary Name or Word, the call to become a self, to become "that one."

These two aspects of Kierkegaard's discourse are both instances of "reduplication." What singularizes the self is its being-before-God. God, however, is not an object or a substance straightforwardly "beyond" language. God is a movement of infinite reduplication that is neither beyond language nor within language. God is prior to the binaries of presence and absence, outside and inside, dis-placed from any determinate place. God is absolute, an elusive absolution from—and of—any fixed position, the solvent that dissolves the closure of both being and language, opening a beyond right in the midst of being and language that keeps both in constant motion. As the self "repeats" this absolution, which in Christian language is the event of

¹⁵⁶ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 133.

“forgiveness,” a repetition of being given-for, the self is reduplicated into and through itself such that its very existence is lived as an echo of the singular, reduplicated, apophatic divine Name: I am who I am, I will be who I will be. It is only before God that the self can become itself, that is, a *reduplicating self* that lives elusively (i.e. freely) through faith, hope, and love. A discourse that seeks not simply to write *about* this movement but to undergo its constant motion will be reduplicating discourse, a discourse that doubles back on itself, expressing its “what” through an elusive “how,” keeping itself always unsettled, eluding closure by writing...

CHAPTER III

INFINITE REDUPLICATION: KIERKEGAARD'S NEGATIVE CONCEPT OF GOD

To become involved with God in any way other than being wounded is impossible, for God himself is this: how one involves himself with him...In respect to God, the *how* is the *what*. –Kierkegaard¹

God is infinite reduplication. – Kierkegaard²

i

My goal in this chapter is to attempt to trace some of the more conceptual contours of Kierkegaard's apophaticism. It is, however, impossible to exhaustively trace these contours. It is a mark of their apophatic power that they are inexhaustible, able to be redetermined and re-launched endlessly and unpredictably. *Fordoblelse*, for instance, "reduplication" or "redoubling," which is intimately related to *Gjentagelse*, "repetition," is a concept that Kierkegaard deploys unsystematically across an extraordinary range of problematics: God, the self, Christ, writing, communication, suffering, joy, patience, faith, hope, love, inwardness, hiddenness—each of these has *Fordoblelse* at its heart. What exactly *Fordoblelse* is, therefore, cannot be definitely said or stabilized. It is a "how" not a "what." It sets thought and existence in motion, not as a principle that produces delimited or articulable identities, the identity of thought and being, for instance, which is the goal of mediation, but as a principle of movement that ruptures identity, that allows an excess into identity. Kierkegaard's concepts are wounded by an open-endedness and an indetermination, a transcendence, a "nothing," that cannot be reinscribed speculatively.

¹ JP, 1405.

² JP, 4571.

The history of Kierkegaard interpretation is sparse when it comes to interpretations of his concept of God.³ This is undoubtedly owing in part to the fact that the quantitative weight of Kierkegaard's pages leans heavily in the direction of ethical, existential, and spiritual exposition. There are only a handful of passages in which Kierkegaard discusses directly his concept of God. Nevertheless, quantitative weight does not decide on qualitative importance. A negatively theological (non)apprehension of God underwrites the movements of his ethical, existential, and spiritual expositions. It is precisely because Kierkegaard's concept of God is apophatic that it hides itself in these expositions, that it gets off itself, ex-positions itself within lived ex-istence.

This chapter will follow this (x)-positioning of the concept of God. I will move through three of the theological coordinates that frame Kierkegaard's concept of God: "infinite qualitative difference," "unconditioned, being-in-and-for-itself," and "infinite reduplication." Of these three, infinite reduplication expresses the apophatic core of Kierkegaard's thought and connects him, as I've already explored, to Eckhartian apophaticism. Along the way, I will show how these coordinates underwrite a theological economy of gift, generosity, freedom, and abandon. At the heart of this economy is an apophasis of divine intentionality. Kierkegaard is explicit that in relation to creation God has no intentions, no determinate plan, no why, only an infinite attention, intimacy, generosity, longing and joy. God is nothing but an absolute "with," the "with" of love without why.

ii

Infinite qualitative difference.

³ For instance, a recent article devoted to *Fordoblelse* does not even mention that this concept is Kierkegaard's concept of God. It completely passes this over. This is common in the literature. See Wojciech Kaftanski, "Redoubling/Reduplication," in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Objectivity to Sacrifice*, (Ashgate, 2015), 205-11.

The notion of God as infinite or absolute difference runs through Kierkegaard's authorship. In *Philosophical Fragments*, God is described as "absolutely different."⁴ *Absolute* difference is an entirely dialectical or paradoxical idea, one found also at the heart of Eckhart's theology. Absolute difference is difference absolved not only of sameness but even of difference, meaning that one cannot articulate or grasp the absolute in its difference. It is neither identical nor different. The absolute cannot be placed in the oppositional frames that structure knowledge—not this but that. The absolute is infinitely dis-placed—*neither* this *nor* that. It escapes all opposition, all duality through which it could be reduced to something knowable, even negatively. This is why Eckhart names God as "distinction without distinction," or difference without difference. It is why Kierkegaard says that God has "no distinguishing mark,"⁵ nothing that would mark off God's difference. God is without determination, even negative determination. God is the absolute limit to thought, its "torment"⁶ that leaves it without rest and conclusion, dis-placed and undone. God is beyond all speech, beyond all silence, too. Neither the "*via eminentiae*" nor the "*via negationis*"⁷ puts thought on a path toward God. God is never found as the conclusion of any method. Neither this nor that, God is this: that every method fails. God is no more the infinite perfection of creaturely being than its infinite negation. God escapes, slips beyond, all determinable difference.

When Kierkegaard writes, "God himself is this: how one involves himself with him,"⁸ and, "God is this—that everything is possible,"⁹ and, "In respect to God, the how is the what,"¹⁰ he is letting God slip beyond determination. He is refusing the metaphysical gesture, the

⁴ PF, 44.

⁵ PF, 45.

⁶ PF, 44.

⁷ PF, 44.

⁸ JP, 1405.

⁹ SUD, 40.

¹⁰ JP, 1405.

supplying of predicates to a divine being. God is, for Kierkegaard, “predicatless,”¹¹ without ontological substance, a subjectivity to which no predicates can be attached, or a subjectivity that reduplicates itself as its own predicate—“pure subjectivity,” I am who I am. What is he is doing with these statements, one might say, is laying down a certain grammatical rule, or better, a *style*, an apophatic style.

It might go something like this: when speaking of God, do not speak as if you were supplying predicates to a divine being. Speak, rather, an event, a happening, one that names the happening of the divine as nothing, a nothin-*ing*. God is this—*that*...that everything is possible, that closure is impossible, that metaphysics comes to grief and is tormented by a fever it cannot break, that there is hope, that an abased Jewish peasant’s flesh is hallowed, hollowed, thrown open, made empty, roomy enough for each one, for every one, that I, in shocked response, in repentance, may love that one, that person, that friend, that lover, that neighbor, that enemy with a love that releases, that does not grasp at the knowledge of good and evil.

This is to release into language an apophatic elusiveness and aliveness. It is to free language from the temptation of speaking *about* God. God cannot be spoken *about*. “God cannot be an object.”¹² God moves elusively in the saying of an event, in a saying that does not congeal into a said, or even into a silence, but in a saying that keeps itself alive, trembling, slipping, exclaiming, whispering, moving at a slant, with a swerve, like a dance.

That God escapes and slips beyond all determinable difference is what Kierkegaard means by “infinite qualitative difference.”¹³ What is crucial to clarify here is the meaning of “quality.” A qualitative difference, I am claiming, is not an *ontological* difference. It is not the

¹¹ JP, 200.

¹² JP, 1349.

¹³ CUP, 369. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus writes that God and human being “are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference.”

difference between Being and beings, nor is it the difference between two beings or entities—one infinite, the other finite, for instance. Qualitative difference moves the discourse of difference off of ontology, off of any direct accounting of what “is.” This is not to say that Kierkegaard’s discourse simply *avoids* ontology in favor of, say, psychology, or some other “practical” or “existential” discourse. Kierkegaard’s discourse does have ontological stakes (I will return to this at the end of chapter six). He does not so much avoid ontology and metaphysics as *void* them, empty them, shatter them, by way of a kind of apophatic, poetic, religious fervor, “the passion of the infinite.”¹⁴ The religious thrust of his discourse is too restless, too attuned to the exigency of lived existence in its openness before the absolute, too insistent that discourse on the self not have the feel of an autopsy¹⁵ to be confined to an ontology. For Kierkegaard, knowledge of being is never as such edifying. Edification exceeds ontology.

The difference between God and the self cannot be formulated as a concept, that is, within a discourse that stabilizes their difference in an abstract accounting. The difference between God and the self is their enacted *relation*, which is too slippery, alive, and rich to be transposed into metaphysical discourse. This relation cannot be thought, it can only be *lived* as a *differenc-ing* of inwardness, a spacing opened and traversed within lived existence. Qualitative difference is “expressed through action in the transformation of existence.”¹⁶ Thinking this difference requires a discourse that breaks with or exceeds ontology in the direction of ethical-religious responsibility, a discourse that ruptures ontology by calling the reader to a *task*, a work, an upbuilding. “Qualitative difference” names the breaking open of the ontological by the ethical

¹⁴ CUP, 203.

¹⁵ SUD, 5: “Everything essentially Christian must have in its presentation a resemblance to the way a physician speaks at the sickbed; even if only medical experts understand it, it must never be forgotten that the situation is the bedside of a sick person.”

¹⁶ CUP, 387.

and the religious. It names an infinite responsibility, one that Kierkegaard calls “repentance,” a turning toward the outside.

Kierkegaard links quality to singularity: “There is really only one quality—singularity. Everything revolves around this, and this is also why everyone understands qualitatively with regard to himself what he understands quantitatively with regard to others.”¹⁷ A difference in quality is a difference that inheres in itself. It is a mode of self-relation, a reduplication of self, that establishes its difference not through a quantitative, relative difference on a shared horizon such a “being,” as if God were the “highest,” or “most perfect” being, but as a difference that is its own genus, and therefore maintains heterogeneity—secrecy—toward everything outside of itself. (There is no analogy of *being* between God and the creature, on Kierkegaard’s terms). A quality is a difference that cannot announce its difference, which is why the difference or transformation God makes in existence is expressed not in external, quantifiable changes but in “hidden inwardness.”¹⁸ God is this: that I tremble in secret, given again, to the wonder.

Kierkegaard also links quality to that which comes into existence only through a “leap,” a transcendent movement, rather than through an immanent modulation or movement within being. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard’s author critiques Hegel for claiming that an increase in quantity can bring forth a new quality: “It is therefore a superstition when it is maintained in logic that through a continued quantification a new quality is brought forth.”¹⁹ He also critiques Hegel for bringing “the negative” into logic as a principle of movement, thus turning movement, becoming, and qualitative transition into *logical* movements.²⁰ Both moves amount to a reduction of all movement, transition, and coming into existence to immanent

¹⁷ JP, 1986.

¹⁸ CUP, 525ff.

¹⁹ CA, 30.

²⁰ CA, 12.

modulations of being, “which in a profound sense is no movement at all.”²¹ Hegel erases from his system the possibility of surprise and the in-coming of the singular other that would disrupt immanent continuity and let existence gape open with qualitative newness and movement, with a leap, with birth. All difference, all quality, for Hegel, is an immanent outworking and unfolding of being in which all negativity, transition, and movement is folded back into the production of immanent, self-same being, a “self-moving selfsameness”²² as Hegel puts it. For Kierkegaard, this is a flattening out and closing up of existence in which “the qualitative distinction between God and man,” the difference that opens existence off itself, “is pantheistically abolished.”²³

Kierkegaard, by contrast, thinks God as the birth of non-being (nothing) into existence. This is the coming into existence of a qualitative difference, an infinite negativity, that is not dialectically recuperable to being, to the concept. God is a leap, a letting, a break, that births existence anew, that moves existence off itself, forward, not toward any objective goal, but toward the abandon of beginning again, the instant of being given anew, an endless re-launching, an infinite rhythm, repetition, redoubling—a repentance. The difference between God and the self is therefore expressed by Kierkegaard not in general ontological terms but in terms of an existential-spiritual break, a disruption of immanent continuity, an undetermining of time, a throwing open of the past and the present from the future, the break of *forgiveness*. God is this: that forgiveness breaks and therefore breaks open despair, that one is given time again, that the world is repeated anew, that joy comes to birth. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus writes:

As sinner, man is separated from God by the most chasmic qualitative abyss. In turn, of course, God is separated from man by the same chasmic qualitative abyss when he forgives sins. If by some kind of reverse adjustment the divine could be shifted over to

²¹ CA, 13.

²² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10.

²³ SUD, 117.

the human, there is one way in which man could never in all eternity come to be like God: in forgiving sins.²⁴

Forgiveness, which is the gift of non-being, a letting-in of the divine nothing, the birth of the spacing between the self as sinner and the self as new creation, is the coming into existence of God and the self in their infinite qualitative difference. God is the difference, the transition, between the sinful self and the forgiven self, between the self in despair and the self in joy. This difference is not an immanent, logical change, but a transcendent, absurd *leap*, an abandon. Forgiveness is the in-coming of a singular quality that could not be produced through immanent, quantitative movement or change. Forgiveness is *absolute* movement and birth, a movement that puts into motion not the speculative movement of the concept but the movement of the *heart* in *wonder*: “Yes, let us from the bottom of our hearts *wonder* at this! If there is anything we in these times have forgotten, it is to wonder, and therefore also to believe and to hope and to love.”²⁵ In the movement and moment of forgiveness, it is the approach and touch of the impossible that occasions wonder. “Oh, blessed refreshment, that the one who was brought close to despair because [forgiveness] was impossible now believes it, blessedly believes it, but in his soul’s wonder continues to say, ‘It is impossible!’”²⁶ Forgiveness carries and liberates the power of the impossible. God is this: that the impossible touch of forgiveness, impossibly, happens, delivering the self from any horizon of closure.

Again, difference here is not being construed in terms of ontology but in terms of ethical-religious relation, a relation to the impossible. A quality is nothing but a mode of self-relation that includes its relation to the other, a self-relat-*ing* not determined by any prior substance or being, a relating that is its own presupposition. This is, to be sure, exactly how Hegel thinks

²⁴ SUD, 122.

²⁵ CD, 107.

²⁶ CD, 107.

ontological movement or becoming, as a self-positing or self-othering that is its own presupposition. Again, Kierkegaard does in any *simple* way exit ontology or metaphysics. He does not stand outside of their discourses but within them, otherwise. He appropriates the Hegelian structure of ontology, being as self-positing self-relation, but he appropriates it only by exposing it, by placing it within an ethical-religious economy marked by an excess, one not reducible to ontological thought, to the concept. What exceeds the movement of the concept in Kierkegaard's writing, again, is edification, which always concerns itself with lived beginnings or breakthroughs thrown open by a negativity, an impossibility, not recuperable to being.

The quality of self-relating singular to the human, its originary beginning and breakthrough into existence, is *sinfulness*, which, for Kierkegaard, does not name any determinate moral transgression but what comes prior to any determinate sinful act as its very possibility: the free self-relating of the human in its willful autonomy or separation from God, its closure to the other, to the other-ing of existence, which Kierkegaard also calls "offense."²⁷ Sinfulness names the originary, transcendent leap of the individual into existence, the self as it wills or grabs hold of itself in order to stave off the dizziness and anxiety of its creaturliness, its freedom. This freedom is the self's abandonment or thrownness into nothing, into the divine withdrawal, the space of genuine creaturely alterity vis-à-vis the divine. In creating, God withdraws in order to let the self be in freedom, in order to let it become. In the face of this withdrawal, this wholly other-ing, this spacing at the heart of existence, bereft of a principle that structures existence, exposed to its own freedom, to "the nothing that interlaces existence," the self leaps into existence as an anxious self-positing, attempting to take itself as its own principle, which results in an inextricable entanglement and closure of the self within itself. This is the

²⁷ SUD, 122ff.

coming into existence of sinfulness as a quality wholly other to the divine. What is wholly other to the divine is *enclosure*, the self curved in on itself.²⁸ Sinfulness: that in its freedom the self comes to transcend God, harnessing the space of its freedom, the divine withdrawal, into various species of closure and despair, the highest of which is a nihilistic, demonic rage.²⁹

The quality singular to the divine, on the other hand, is *forgiveness*, which is a *dis-enclosure*. In relation to God, “one cannot be inclosed.”³⁰ Forgiveness, like sinfulness, names a self-relating, a reduplication, a relation of the divine life to itself that includes its relation to the creature, in this case a re-opening or repetition of the creature. What is striking about how Kierkegaard construes divine forgiveness, which confirms and puts into play his apophatic concept of God, is that, for him, forgiveness is not the outcome, payoff, or result of an economic act structured by reciprocity and exchange, as in certain penal, sacrificial, and ransom theories of the atonement. Forgiveness, for Kierkegaard, is a sheer, presuppositionless event, a pure, unconditioned gift. It happens in an instant (*Øieblikket*), out of nothing, as the gift of nothing. It is, Kierkegaard says, a divine *forgetting*, a divine unknowing, a divine release of knowledge, a divine *Gelassenheit*. Forgiveness names the self-relation or reduplication of the divine that relates itself to itself not as a field of knowledge, accounting, surveillance, reciprocity, or exchange, that is, as anything determinate, but as *nothing*, as a *nothin-ing*: an open, unconditional, infinite embracing of the creature that embraces precisely by releasing, by granting the birth of a new day, an open future, one that is not an outgrowth of yesterday. God

²⁸ Kierkegaard here stands in the tradition stemming from Augustine through Luther on into pietism that speaks of sinfulness as the curvature of the self into itself. Kierkegaard’s difference from this tradition is that he refuses any single principle or origin of this incurvature, such as pride. For him, sin is a diversity of despairs ranging from self-assertion to self-abnegation.

²⁹ SUD, 72. Kierkegaard’s account of the emergence of sinfulness as a singular quality is indebted to Schelling’s account of the *positive* nature of evil, evil not as a privation, but as an autonomous force.

³⁰ CA, 133-4.

gives (reduplicates) the divine life not as a knowing but as an unknowing, an abandon, a prodigal embrace. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes:

Forgetting, when God does it in relation to sin, is the opposite of creating, since to create is to bring forth from nothing, and to forget is to take back to nothing. What is hidden from my eyes, that I have never seen; but what is hidden behind my back, that I have seen. The one who loves forgives in this way: he forgives, he forgets, he blots out the sin, in love he turns toward the one he forgives; but when he turns toward him, he of course cannot see what is lying behind his back.³¹

The loving turn of forgiveness turns simultaneously toward and away, turning toward the sinner by turning out a-way, a way out of despair, an open road. Forgiveness is the hinge of the self on which it is flung open again to the divine withdrawal, to freedom.³² It is a with-, an embrace, that -draws the self away from itself as a closed determination, (re)turning the self to itself as an opening. Forgiveness is a repetition of the instant of creation that un-creates in order to create anew, returning the self to its nothingness in order to give the self to itself again, repeated, redoubled, re-launched. Kierkegaard elsewhere construes this act of divine forgetting at the heart of forgiveness as an act of divine *omnipotence*: “just as God is almighty in creating out of nothing, so he is almighty in—uncreating something, for to forget, almightily to forget, is indeed to uncreate something.”³³ This points to the paradoxical understanding of divine omnipotence that Kierkegaard holds, omnipotence as the capacity to give freedom, the capacity to withdraw itself and make itself weak for the other, which I will discuss ahead.

The point I want to make here concerns Kierkegaard’s reversal of the problematic of absolute knowing. The trajectory of idealism, culminating in Hegel, is toward the identity of thought and being in which the absolute is an absolute *knowing*. Subjectivity in idealism enacts a knowing or “seeing” that objectively grounds being, that gives being form and determination.

³¹ WL, 296.

³² Eckhart uses the image of a “hinge” to describe the inner motions of the soul. God is the inner hinge of the soul.

³³ JP, 1224.

This is why Hegel can take up in his own way Eckhart's statement about the unity of God's eye with the mind's eye. The mind is capable of an absolute seeing, a total viewing that brings into being what it views.

Kierkegaard reverses this problematic even while staying very close to it. To exist "before God" is to exist in relation to an absolute seeing that brings into existence what it sees. But it is not, for Kierkegaard, to take up the standpoint of absolute seeing. It is, rather, to face it, to be faced by it, face to face, at an infinite proximity, with an absolute intimacy. Absolute subjectivity is not the subject's absolute knowing but its being known absolutely, its being seen into existence, its utter transparency to an infinite eye that sees without being seen. This opens a gap at the heart of existential subjectivity, the gap that *is* existential subjectivity, the gap between my seeing of myself, which can only be relative and partial, and my being seen absolutely. Within this gap stretches the trembling tension and passion of responsibility, that I am claimed before I claim myself, that my claiming of myself, my becoming myself, must become a hearkening to the other, a dispossession, the *task* of giving myself in relation, without knowledge: "Here I am." (Gen. 22:1).

This posture of responsibility, which is an apophatic posture, the self's irreducibility to being, its openness or calling beyond being, to a task, is at the heart of "the ethical" as well as what Johannes Climacus calls "Religiousness A." However, it receives a further, an infinite, qualification in Climacus' "Religiousness B," a qualification that releases the fully apophatic power (or weakness, rather) of Kierkegaard's thought. It is Religiousness B that introduces the infinite quality of forgiveness through which absolute knowing undergoes an even deeper reversal. It becomes an absolute *un*-knowing, God's un-knowing of the self, which is simultaneously the self's un-knowing of itself, the self's un-knowing of God, *and even* God's un-

knowing of God, the divine forgetting. This is the direction in which I want to interpret divine forgiveness, as the un-seeing of the divine eye, its wink—*Øieblikket*—that in an instant births the self, and the divine life, anew. It is, I might venture, the moment of mystical union in Kierkegaard, the moment when my eye and God’s eye become one eye, God and the self absolutely one in unknowing, an act wholly God’s and wholly the self’s, the birth of nothing in the soul, *Gottesburt*, *Gelassenheit*, my eye and God’s eye together seeing nothing. Absolute seeing, for Kierkegaard, becomes the absolution of seeing: “everything goes black before my eyes.”³⁴ In the oneness and darkness of this instant in which the soul is returned to its abyssal un-ground there is no *articulable* difference between God and the self, but there is an infinite *differenc-ing*, the birth of an infinite distance, the infinite qualitative distance between despair and joy.

When the scribes and Pharisees has seized a woman in open sin, they placed her in the middle of the temple, face to face with the Savior; but Jesus stooped down and wrote with his finger on the ground. He who knew all things surely knew also what the Pharisees and the scribes knew before they told it to him. The scribes and the Pharisees quickly discovered her guilt; it was indeed easy, since her sin was open. They also discovered another sin, one of which they made themselves guilty as they craftily laid snares for the Lord. But Jesus stooped down and wrote with his finger on the ground. Why, do you suppose, did he stoop down; why, do you suppose, did he write with his finger on the ground? Did he sit there like a judge attending carefully to the prosecutor’s speech, listening and stooping down to note the complaint so as not to forget it, so as to judge scrupulously; was this woman’s guilt the only thing the Lord put in writing? Or is he who is writing with his finger on the ground instead writing in order to erase and forget? There the sinner stood, surrounded by those who were perhaps even more guilty, who loudly accused her, but love stooped down and did not hear the accusation, which vanished into thin air; it wrote with its finger in order to erase what it itself knew, because sin discovers a multitude of sins, but love hides a multitude of sins. Yes, even before the eyes of sin, love hides a multitude of sins, because with one word from the Lord the Pharisees and the scribes were silenced, and there was no accuser anymore, there was no one who condemned her. But Jesus said to her: Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more—for the punishment of sin breeds new sin, but love hides a multitude of sins.³⁵

³⁴ FTR, 40.

³⁵ EUD, 67-8.

God is this: that I may let go, that I may let the sky tear open and the ground fall from beneath my feet. God is this: that with no ground and no horizon, suspended and trembling over nothing, I may give myself to the upbuilding, the uplift, of a strong wind, a breath, a becoming, an abandon. God is this: that “my self is, as it were, outside of myself, and it has to be acquired, and repentance is my love for this self, because I choose it absolutely out of the hand of the eternal God.”³⁶ God is this: that the concept is erased by the gentle hand of love. God is this: that an outside opens on the inside. God is this: that identity is liquidated with a weeping, a letting, a spilling out into an undetermined future. God is this: what sorrow! what joy!

iii

Unconditioned, being-in-and-for-itself

In number of late journal entries, Kierkegaard speaks of “unconditioned, being-in-and-for-itself” to refer to God or the absolute.³⁷ To understand the apophatic force of this conceptual compound, it is necessary to grasp its origin within idealism, Kant and Hegel specifically. “The unconditioned” is a Kantian notion, “being-in-and-for-itself” a Hegelian one. Becoming clear on this provenance will allow a greater sense of how Kierkegaard appropriates idealist metaphysical notions only by rupturing them. By stringing together “unconditioned” and “being-in-and-for-itself,” Kierkegaard performs a kind of apophatic alchemy. The terms come to signify an excess beyond their idealist determinations.

In Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, “the unconditioned” is a transcendental idea that signifies “how the understanding is to be employed in dealing with experience in its totality.”³⁸

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, ed. W.H. Auden (New York: New York Review of Book, 1999), 73.

³⁷ JP, 1436, 1447, 1449, 2079.

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. trans. Norman Kemp Smith (St. Martins, 1965), A593 / B621. Hereafter CPR.

All synthetic judgments of the understanding presuppose as the condition of their possibility the horizon of totality, that there is a *unity* that underlies all phenomenal experience. The unconditioned is this unity that is given in and with the conditioning that synthesizes experience. Synthetic judgments, such as the experience of temporality, would have no ultimate sense if they were not directed toward the unconditioned unity or totality of phenomenal experience. The conditioned and the unconditioned are therefore given together: “if the conditioned is given, the entire sum of conditions, and consequently the absolutely unconditioned (through which alone the condition has been possible) is also given.”³⁹ As the “totality of conditions for any given conditioned,” the unconditioned is the “ground of synthesis of the conditioned.”⁴⁰

The point to highlight here is how the unconditioned functions for Kant as a *ground*. To be sure, this ground as such falls outside of phenomenal experience, and therefore the understanding has no concept of it. Totality as such cannot be experienced. The unconditioned “prescribes to the understanding its direction toward a certain unity of which it has itself no concept.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, even though the unconditioned as such cannot be known or experienced, it is the principle that directs the understanding toward the trust or faith that everything conditioned has a ground and therefore a purpose, an intelligibility, an explanation, a sufficient reason, a why. Phenomenal experience is therefore given a teleology. In Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, this teleology becomes the movement of the understanding toward faith in an *ethical* unity. The ethical is the telos of the understanding. “God” becomes for Kant the ground of an unconditioned ethical imperative that applies equally to all. Kierkegaard’s

³⁹ CPR, A409 / B436.

⁴⁰ CPR, A323 / B380.

⁴¹ CPR, A326 / B383.

“teleological suspension of the ethical” scrambles and ruptures these coordinates. But first, Hegel.

Whereas Kant speaks of “the unconditioned” in order to refer to the idea of a ground or totality, Hegel speaks of “being-in-and-for-itself.” This shift is indicative of Hegel’s desire to erase the elements of negative theology that are found in Kant. For Kant, totality is “beyond” phenomenal experience. As such, it is unknowable and can only be related to with a kind of faith, even if for Kant this must be a rational faith. This split between faith and knowledge is one that Hegel wants to overcome.⁴² Totality, for Hegel, is immanent, not beyond. “Being-in-and-for-itself” expresses this immanence. It expresses that the absolute, being as such, not only holds itself within itself, like Kant’s “thing in itself,” but does this holding by *showing* itself to itself, *manifesting* itself to itself through its loss and recuperation of itself within finitude, thus becoming knowable as such. The relation between ground and grounded, for Hegel, is one of identity. What grounds is what is grounded, totality relating itself to itself through itself.

Kierkegaard will critique Hegel’s “being-in-and-for-itself” only by appropriating it. This happens first in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, where his debate with Hegel beings as a debate over how to interpret negativity in Socrates. Kierkegaard and Hegel are in agreement that Socrates was the first to formulate the problematic of the absolute as a problematic of *self-consciousness*. To know the absolute is always to know oneself in relation to it. Hence, the Socratic dictum: know thyself. To know the absolute is to know *how* to relate oneself to the absolute, absolutely. This is the basis for Hegel’s finding in Socrates an implicit affirmation of the absolute as being-in-and-for-itself. The absolute is always a self-relating, subjectivity manifesting itself to itself. Moreover, both Kierkegaard and Hegel acknowledge that

⁴² See Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, for an insistent and at times blistering critique of Kant, Fichte, and Jakobi for their philosophies of “subjectivity.”

Socrates apprehends the absolute only under the form of negation, as “infinite absolute negativity.”⁴³ Socrates arrived at “being-in-and-for-itself only as the infinitely abstract, he had the absolute in the form of nothing. By way of the absolute, reality became nothing, but in turn the absolute was nothing.”⁴⁴

The debate between Kierkegaard and Hegel will turn on the status of this “nothing,” which itself turns on how each positions Socrates within the history of thought. Hegel, for his part, regards Socrates as the *surpassable* beginning of the speculative dialectic. He represents the beginning of thought in the immediacy of pure abstraction. Socrates’ merit and necessity was to have grasped the absolutely pure and abstract formality of being as being-in-and-for-itself. This formality, however, must undergo a progressive determination beyond abstract immediacy. “Nothing,” for Hegel, is that *from which* thought departs in order to become rich in speculative content. Socrates clears the ground and prepares the speculative soil.

For Kierkegaard, this is to reverse and negate Socrates’ significance. Throughout the entire authorship, beginning in *The Concept of Irony*, Socrates represents for Kierkegaard a sort of outside or perpetual challenge to philosophical and theological knowledge as such. Socrates is not a surpassable beginning from which one departs onward toward speculative knowledge. He is a non-surpassable beginning one continually returns to in order to derail the speculative project by returning all thought and existence to “nothing.” Socrates stands as a perpetual stumbling block, a ceaseless call to unknowing.⁴⁵ In a late journal entry, Kierkegaard writes, “The system

⁴³ CI, 271.

⁴⁴ CI, 236.

⁴⁵ In the very last texts we have from Kierkegaard’s hand, which constitute his “attack on Christendom,” we find him comparing himself to Socrates and insisting that what Christendom needs is another Socrates: “The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates.” Here at the end of his authorship, Kierkegaard returns to its non-surpassable beginning, the Socratic moment of unknowing. Christianity does, for Kierkegaard, provide a higher qualification of subjectivity than is available in Socrates. But this is not because Christianity moves beyond Socratic unknowing into a determinate knowing. It is because Christianity intensifies the moment of unknowing by placing it *in time*, as a repetition forwards, rather than a recollection backwards. The eternal future that opens in Christ is even

begins with ‘nothing’; the mystic always ends with ‘nothing.’ The latter is the divine nothing, just as Socrates’ ignorance was devout fear of God, the ignorance with which he did not begin but ended, or which he continually reached.”⁴⁶ In *The Concept of Irony*, he writes that Socrates lets the “in-and-for-itself work itself out (*via negationis*) of the qualifications of being in which it had been hitherto.”⁴⁷ Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel will always turn, as I’ve said, on an affirmation of an abyssal negativity not recuperable to being, one that “works itself out...of being” rather than establishing itself in and as being. “In-and-for-itself” comes to mean for Kierkegaard not a movement of determination but an un-determining, the reverse of the Hegelian meaning. In order to see exactly how “in-and-for-itself” constitutes an un-determining movement it is necessary to turn to “infinite reduplication.” But first, I want to return to “the unconditioned.”

Kierkegaard’s appropriation of the language of “the unconditioned” carries forward some of its Kantian meaning, specifically its unknowability as well as the co-givenness of the conditioned and the unconditioned. Kierkegaard expresses this co-givenness in his account of the self as a synthesis. The self is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity.⁴⁸ Given in and with finitude is its infinite and eternal horizon that as such is unknowable. Kierkegaard, however, pushes this idea to an extreme in a way that unhinges it from its Kantian meaning.

For Kant, the unconditioned has a *grounding* function. Specifically, this means that everything given in experience has a necessary and sufficient basis. Phenomenal experience is

more abyssal than the eternal past toward which Socrates gestures ironically. Christ, one could even say, is the “sublation” of Socrates, which is why Kierkegaard says of him in *The Point of View*: “It is true, he was not a Christian; that I know, and yet I am thoroughly convinced that he has become one.”

⁴⁶ JP, 2797.

⁴⁷ CI, 236.

⁴⁸ SUD, 13.

upheld by a rational harmony, albeit one that cannot itself be experienced. Between the unconditioned and the conditioned, between cause and effect, between eternity and time there is rational harmony and commensurability. Kierkegaard lets this rational harmony and commensurability give way to radical *incommensurability*. He uses forceful language to gesture at the incommensurable relation between the conditioned and the unconditioned. The unconditioned is “fatal to relative being,”⁴⁹ a “sunstroke directly on the brain...It is the infinite concentrated in one single blow and one single moment,” which is “something everyone must shrink from as more horrible than death.”⁵⁰ Here the unconditioned *ungrounds* the conditioned, dislodges it from any system of rational harmony, a loss that is more horrible than death. If, for Kant, the unconditioned grounds the use of teleological language, for Kierkegaard, the unconditioned obliterates teleology, leaving existence without why. I quote again the following passage:

By nature human beings dread walking in the dark—no wonder, then, that they by nature dread the unconditioned, getting involved with the unconditioned, of which it holds true that no night and 'no darkness is half so black' as this darkness and this night in which all relative goals...in which all considerations (the lights we generally use to help ourselves), in which even the most sensitive and warmest feelings of devotion—are extinguished, for otherwise it is not unconditionally the unconditioned...Only when every ‘Why’ vanishes in the night of the unconditioned and becomes silent in the silence of the unconditioned, only then can a person venture everything...In the unconditioned all teleology vanishes...⁵¹

In relation to the unconditioned, the understanding loses itself, loses every “why.” The understanding “by nature” would like to understand, would like to be to be able to find an immanent link between an ultimate cause and its effects, between ground and grounded, between the absolute and the relative. It would like to be able to aim at a telos, climb the analogical ladder

⁴⁹ JP, 4918.

⁵⁰ JP, 4903.

⁵¹ JP, 4908, 4901.

that leads from the relative to the absolute. It would like to articulate a *reason*, a sufficient reason, for existence, for living for the absolute. For Kierkegaard, the unconditioned disallows all of this. “As far as venturing everything is concerned, I have no ‘Why’ at all; I am controlled simply and solely by this unconditional; I must do it, I cannot do otherwise.”⁵² The most the understanding can do is consent to “the impossibility of giving reasons for the unconditioned.”⁵³ Reasons, in fact, are a hindrance: “As far as the unconditioned is concerned, reasons, the fact that there are reasons, is not a plus—no, no, it is a minus, a subtracting which changes the unconditioned into the conditioned.”⁵⁴ “If a person dimly glimpses one ‘Why,’ something is impaired, he sees 1,000 ‘Why’s’—watch out, he will never venture a thing but will become a professor of the 1,000 ‘Why’s.’”⁵⁵ And when one becomes a professor of the 1,000 ‘Why’s,’ one becomes a ridiculous contradiction:

Then come the ‘reasons,’ and then ‘scientific scholarship’ appears, whole sciences and professors etc., all these enterprises which, themselves dependent on people by needing their money etc., are supposed to help people into—the unconditioned! If someone who was going to run a race came rolling up dressed in seven overcoats, five pairs of trousers, and enormous boots and an open umbrella, everyone would find it ridiculous, but scientific scholarship and professors and reasons which are supposed to help people into the unconditioned are fundamentally just as ridiculous.⁵⁶

The unconditioned shows itself only through the abandonment of reasons, the loss of all why, the losing of one’s mind in “the martyrdom of madness,”⁵⁷ the vanishing of teleology into a dark night.

This loss more horrible than death does not equal hopelessness. It is, for that absurd soul ready to venture a bottomless affirmation of life that comes only on the other side of the loss of

⁵² JP, 4901.

⁵³ JP, 4896.

⁵⁴ JP, 4895.

⁵⁵ JP, 4901.

⁵⁶ JP, 4904.

⁵⁷ UDVS, 335.

every why, that which births faith, for “faith sees best in the dark.”⁵⁸ Specifically, for Kierkegaard, this means that religious subjectivity is never identical with a program, a calculated agenda, a demand for conversion into a specific religious identity, the protection of an institution, or any kind of objective accomplishment. In short, it is never attached to any cause. God is the negation of every cause, even the negation of having negation as a cause. Kierkegaard writes, “No, no! God has no cause, is no advocate. For him everything is infinitely nothing...in this sense he has no cause, is not finitely interested in having it win...This is God’s sublimity.”⁵⁹ Rather than winning in the world, God is abandoned to loving the world without why, abandoned to the patient and gentle upbuilding of “spirit,” without demand: “Yet here also God is infinite love in that he does not suddenly all at once overpower a person and demand that he shall be spirit...No, he handles him so gently; it is a long operation, an upbringing.”⁶⁰ The unconditioned: fatal to relative being, the obliteration of teleology, absolute incommensurability, and simultaneously, absolute patience, absolute gentleness, a refusal to control, a slow and trembling venturing out over 70,000 fathoms.

A theological discourse on Kierkegaard’s terms must therefore let into itself a kind of anarchy, the loss of the arche, the withdrawal of the unconditioned as a metaphysical first principle that would provide order, stability, and teleology to a system of existence. Theological discourse must become a witness to the impossible, to the impossibility of subsuming the movements of faith, hope, and love under any why, any reason, any calculation, any cause, any demand, any drive toward accomplishment, identity, or closure. Before God, they gape open in stunned adoration of a trembling darkness.

⁵⁸ UDVS, 238.

⁵⁹ JP, 251.

⁶⁰ JP, 251.

Infinite Reduplication

That “being-in-and-for-itself” is “unconditioned,” that the absolute relates itself to itself without why, with abandon, that God is nothing but the giving of God as a nothin-ing, is what Kierkegaard means by “infinite reduplication.” Here we approach the apophatic core. Its dark center.

It was not until the last years of his life that Kierkegaard provided an explicit, albeit brief, statement of his concept of God. These passages are extremely important even though they tend to be unknown or under-interpreted in the secondary literature.⁶¹ They make explicit what implicitly underwrites the whole authorship, namely, that God is an infinite reduplication of subjectivity—pure subjectivity. Here are the passages:

God is pure subjectivity, ideal, bare subjectivity, has nothing whatsoever of objective being within himself; for everything which has objectivity is thereby reduced into relativities.⁶²

God has not an element of objectivity in God’s being...for this would limit God and relativize God; but God relates himself objectively to God’s own subjectivity, but this again is only a reduplication [*Fordoblelse*] of God’s subjectivity...God is infinite reduplication [*uendelig Fordoblelse*], which of course no human being can be: [the human being] can neither totally transcend himself so that he relates objectively to himself, nor become so subjective that he can totally consummate what he in his objective transcendence over himself has understood with respect to himself—and if he could, he cannot unconditionally subjectively render this glimpse of himself.⁶³

What I want to show here is how Kierkegaard, once again, appropriates the idealist notion of self-reflexivity only to turn it inside-out, to get it off itself, to let it become a critique of identity

⁶¹ For what I regard as an under-interpretation, see Arnold Come, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997).

⁶² JP, 1449.

⁶³ JP, 4571.

rather than its validation. The self-reflexivity that is God is an absolute expenditure, an abandon, not a self-*knowing*, but a self-*giving*—without why.

These passages turn self-reflexivity inside-out subtly and quickly, but also decisively. Two moves or turns are made, particularly in the second passage. First, there is the movement of inward differentiation within God, which is a movement of self-relation or self-transcendence: “God relates himself objectively to God’s own subjectivity.” This move is Kierkegaard’s initial appropriation of self-reflexivity as an ontological notion, an objective delimiting of being. To relate “objectively” is to open the space of knowledge, the distance between knower and known that allows knowledge of the known. So far, God here would simply be the ideality of knowledge: in objective and transparent self-relation, God knows God perfectly. But then comes the apophatic turn: “...but this again is only a reduplication of God’s subjectivity...God is infinite reduplication.”

What carries the apophatic force in this second turn is the word “only.” God’s self-relation is *only* a doubling of God’s *subjectivity*. Infinite reduplication is an indicator of *pure* subjectivity, which is the erasure of any objectivity in God. The point is that in relating to God, God relates to nothing objective, that is, to *nothing*. This is a decisive break from the Hegelian account of self-reflexivity in which the subject knows itself through a mediation of its own objective nature to itself. For Kierkegaard, pure subjectivity is a self-relation without any mediation at all. In particular, this means that there is no objective nature that precedes, either logically or ontologically, the movement of self-relation. God does not have a nature. God has no essence. God is nothing.

This is not however, some sort of static, accomplished vacuity. The sense of naming God as infinite reduplication is to indicate God as a nothingness that *moves* and *acts*, as it were, that

opens, that gives birth to itself as nothing, that noth-ings, a nothin-ing. It indicates God's own freedom from God, God's abandonment of every *position* in being, even every position beyond being. One might think of Eckhart's boiling water, an indeterminate medium in pure motion with no stable or fixed center anywhere. Or one might think of dancing: a subject in the movement of abandoning any and every fixed position, the body getting off itself, evacuating the self of any essence, of any identity. God is the spacing and rhythm, the repetition, of an apophatic opening, the movement of abandon.

Kierkegaard here is breaking open from within the tradition of naming the absolute as self-thinking thought that runs from Aristotle through Hegel. The identity of thinking and what is thought in this tradition turns on a kind of dualism, that between the movement of subjectivity and what this movement presupposes, what thought thinks, namely, its own objective being. The force of "infinite reduplication" is an undoing of this dualism. However, it is not that God is simply identified with one pole of the subject-object dualism, or with the dualism itself, as in Hegel. Pure subjectivity is a subjectivity formed purely through itself and therefore not by way of *opposition* to objectivity, as if by simply negating objectivity (the world, finitude, the body, etc.) one could arrive at God. Pure subjectivity eludes any oppositional or dialectical identity and therefore eludes the whole subject-object framework. This means, crucially, that God is not *a* subject at all, not a determinate subject outfitted with the attributes we tend to attribute to a self-conscious, self-identical, sovereign subject, namely, agency, intentionality, a unified and determinate field of consciousness, etc. The subjectivity that is God occurs in excess of all such determinations.

A self-relating or self-reflecting without a preceding or implicit objective nature evacuates even the self or subjectivity doing the relating or reflecting. In God, there is no

substantial subject or self who then relates. There is only the event of relating, a reflection in which nothing and no one substantial is reflected, like a mirror facing a mirror, which opens up an abyss, the infinite event of reflection. What pure subjectivity and infinite reduplication would indicate, then, is simply relation itself, limitless, bottomless relation. One might say that the divine life is a reflection of itself within itself that occurs always in excess of itself. Such excess might be thought of as the movement of an infinite *de*-flection in which the possibility of a static and centered subjectivity is always already, eternally, abandoned in favor of wildly open and hospitable field of relationality that offers itself without reserve as the holding environment for infinitely diverse and multiple others.⁶⁴ The absolute, then, would not be a static principle that orders being objectively. It is, rather, *the instant of relation* that opens everywhere, from nowhere. God is this: that the spacing of relation never ceases to open, eccentrically.

I want to trace two implications of God as infinite reduplication: God's unknowability to God and the impossibility of divine intentions. First, God's unknowability to God.

A subjectivity that relates itself to itself purely as subjectivity has no objective basis within itself that could occasion knowledge of itself. There is simply nothing objective to know. The movement of the divine life exceeds its own knowability. Eckhart speaks of this unknowability in God as the "simple ground"⁶⁵ of the divine life. It is a "quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit."⁶⁶ This desert is the "innermost part, where no one dwells...and there [the divine life] is more inward than it can be

⁶⁴ Implicit and undeveloped in Kierkegaard's concept of God—infinite reduplication—is a trinitarian logic. If one were to tease out a grammar of the Trinity along Kierkegaardian lines it would be entirely pneumato-centric, or rather, pneumato-eccentric. Father and Son would not face each other squarely, as it were, but always at a slant, together turned outward, their relation eternally thrown open by the Spirit as the roominess in which otherness comes to birth.

⁶⁵ ME, 198.

⁶⁶ ME, 198.

to itself, for this ground is simple silence.”⁶⁷ This deserted ground “is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown, and it was never known, and it will never be known. God remains there with himself, unknown.”⁶⁸ And further: “The authorities say that God is a being, and a rational one, and that he knows all things. I say that God is neither being nor rational, and that he does not know this or that.”⁶⁹

I want to suggest that the logic of Kierkegaard’s concept of God leads out into this quiet desert. That God is infinite reduplication means that the divine life is so infinitely intimate with itself as movement, so immediately in motion, so fully abandoned to itself as a nothin-ing, that it does not have knowledge of itself. It cannot gain an objective position on itself. It eternally abandons the possibility of such a position by reduplicating itself *only* as subjectivity. Or its “knowledge” of itself, if one prefers, is its living relation to itself as a nothin-ing. God is who God is, will be who God will be, a “tautologically...introverted infinity,”⁷⁰ without the mediation of objective self-knowledge, or with a self-relating that is something other than an objective self-knowing—passion or abandon, one might say. The divine life is a repetition of itself that is a self-*giving*, without reserve.

Objective self-knowledge here would be a kind of imperfection, a hesitation or halting in the divine life that would introduce a detour through objectivity and duality, an abstraction of the divine life from itself as gift. God’s unknowability to God is therefore not some kind of lack, as if it signified some sort of limitation or finitude within God, as in versions of process theology. On Kierkegaard’s terms, *knowledge itself* would be the lack, the inability to abandon oneself entirely into the movement and moment of relation in which objective positions and points of

⁶⁷ ME, 198.

⁶⁸ ME, 196.

⁶⁹ ME, 201.

⁷⁰ JP, 4898.

view are impossible. God's unknowability to God is the excessiveness of the divine life as infinite relation, which is enacted as God's freedom in self-giving, the freedom to make room for infinitely diverse and singular others. God is nothing but the possibility of such others who each bear an absolutely unique and unrepeatable—i.e. non-objective—relation to the divine and point of view on existence. God is, in other words, the eventfulness and gift of singularity, of singular selves who share only their irreducible distance and spacing from each other, a distance and spacing, an unknowability, that is precisely the possibility of relation and responsibility, of faith, hope, and love. God, I am saying, is the whence of such irreducible multiplicity, of a relationality that exceeds knowability, of the wholly otherness of every other that will never, not now, not in all eternity, be mediated into a determinate and objective totality.

This is why Kierkegaard articulates the infinitude reduplication that is God as a movement of *love*, specifically as a movement of love that does not know or mediate itself objectively. The love that is God has already, eternally, given itself, made room for singular others, and will give itself again, this very instant, radically prior to any possible objective knowledge, even of itself. Let me quote here a crucial passage from *Works of Love* that identifies love with infinite reduplication. To understand the full implications of this passage (and so many others in *Works of Love*) it is necessary to keep in mind that “love” in this text is another name for “God,” and vice versa: “love is God.”⁷¹ This is why love in the text so often acquires its own subjectivity. God is love, and love is God, which is why Kierkegaard writes in the opening prayer of *Works of Love* that the “one who loves is what he is only by being in you!”⁷² That love is at once a human work and the very movement of God's own life points to the apophatic de-

⁷¹ WL, 121.

⁷² WL, 3.

substantiation of the divine life I have been speaking of. God is the happening of love; love is the happening of God. And love is a nothin-ing: “The one who loves discovers nothing.”⁷³

The passage I will quote comes in the context of Kierkegaard speaking of the incalculability of love, its infinitude. He is positioning himself here against “the scholars” and “the philosophers” who “are proud of the calculations of the infinite.”⁷⁴ Kierkegaard writes:

But what, then, is able to take love out of its element? As soon as love tarries with itself it is out of its element. What does it mean, to tarry with itself? It means to become an object for itself. But an object is always a dangerous matter if one is to move forward; an object is like a finite, fixed point, a boundary, a stopping place, a dangerous thing for infinitude. Love can never infinitely become its own object...for infinitely to be an object for itself is to remain in infinitude and thus simply to exist or continue to exist—since love is a reduplication [*Fordoblelse*] in itself...When the object of love is thus finite, love concentrates on itself, for *infinitely* to tarry with itself means precisely a becoming; but when love finitely tarries with itself, everything is lost. Think of an arrow flying, as is said, with the speed of an arrow. Imagine that it for an instant has an impulse to want to tarry with itself, perhaps in order to see how far it has come, or how high it is soaring above the earth, or how its speed compares with the speed of another arrow that is also flying with the speed of an arrow—in that same second the arrow falls to the ground.

The same thing happens to love when it *finitely* tarries with itself or becomes an object to itself—which, more precisely determined, is *comparison*. Love cannot infinitely compare itself with itself, for infinite self-comparison would only be a way of saying that it is itself; in such a comparison there is no third factor, love is a reduplication [*Fordoblelse*] and therefore there is no comparison.⁷⁵

The most important line in this passage is Kierkegaard’s claim that “love can never infinitely become its own object,” which means that “love cannot infinitely compare itself with itself.” And this is so because “love is a reduplication in itself.” To compare itself with itself would be for love to know itself. In order to do this, however, there would have to be a “third factor” that would mediate such self-comparison. The idea of an objective nature is this third factor. The possibility that the relation of love to itself is a *knowledge* of itself is secured by positing an objective nature that would secure its position in being.

⁷³ WL, 287.

⁷⁴ WL, 182.

⁷⁵ WL, 182.

In its relation of itself to itself, however, love has “no third factor” through which it could compare itself to itself. Love, in other words, has no determinate nature. In its self-relation love is withdrawn from any position in being, from any objectivity. This is why Kierkegaard at the beginning of *Works of Love* compares the origin of love, its source, to the withdrawn and hidden source of a spring. He writes:

Where does love come from, where does it have its origin and its source, where is the place it has its abode from which it flows? Yes, this place is hidden or secret... You cannot see this place; however deeply you penetrate, the origin eludes you in remoteness and hiddenness. Even when you have penetrated furthest in, the origin is always still a bit further in, like the source of the spring that is furthest away just when you are closest to it. From this place flows love along many paths, but along none of these paths can you force your way into its hidden origin.⁷⁶

The origin of love is radically withdrawn or hidden, without objective place or purpose either in the world or in itself. And yet this is precisely what allows love to flow along “many paths” in the world with no one of them being in any way the privileged or objective path to a representable origin. The withdrawal of love as origin from objectivity is what releases love into existence as a singularizing power, as a power that separates and individuates along infinitely many paths, as many paths as there are single individuals. Love, one could say, is hidden everywhere, in every neighbor, yet shows itself objectively nowhere. This is why the whole ethic of *Works of Love* is centered around loving forth the love that is hidden in the other, loving it forth as hidden, in such a way that the neighbor is allowed to remain hidden in that very love, hidden in her or his singularity, which is to say, hidden in God.

In this sense, love is the very opening of space and time for the beloved, who is always singular, each time absolutely unique and unrepeatable. Love is the opening *of* space and time that itself does not *take* space and time. This is the sense in which love is eternal, giving itself

⁷⁶ WL, 8-9.

always in an instant, as the repetition of the instant that withdraws each time as the very opening of time. Love is the nothin-ing that allows the beloved to be, that opens time and space for the other without demand, without why. Love gives itself not in order to determine itself through the other, as in the Hegelian movement of love, not in order to *mediate* itself into objectivity, but only to *reduplicate* itself. Love gives itself in order to give itself. Love loves in order to love. Such reduplication is “a need in love itself,”⁷⁷ love’s longing to be itself only by giving itself freely, with no calculation of a return or recognition. This is the sense in which love “infinitely tarries with itself,” which in fact is not a *tarrying*, a stopping, but a “becoming,” a flowing along infinitely singular paths, a movement so infinitely abandoned to itself as the source of singularization that all objective calculation is left behind. Like an arrow in flight, or like a body that dances, or like a spring that overflows into multiple paths, love *exceeds itself* as the very movement by which it is itself. At every instant it is already beyond its own position, already beyond the possibility of its own objectivity, hidden as the withdrawn origin of each other, of every other. Love is the redoubling of itself in excess of itself, a throwing open, an infinite hospitality that longs to give space and time to each other as if it were the only other. If love sought to grasp its position, to posit or mediate itself objectively, to know itself or be known, it would immediately collapse into itself and fall to the ground. It would cease to be an opening for the other and become instead a closure into itself. Love lives only as the infinite repetition of the instant or moment of opening to the singular other. “But to lose the moment,” Kierkegaard writes, “is to become momentary.”⁷⁸ That is, if love sought to catch a view of itself objectively, to abstract itself from the moment of its giving, its flying, its dancing, its flowing, it would

⁷⁷ WL, 4.

⁷⁸ WL, 183.

wither. Love infinitely, eternally, *abides* in the instant of letting-in time for the other without knowledge, yet with infinite faith and bottomless hope.

That love's excess is not an *overwhelming* of the other but rather a generous *making room*, a hospitality, indicates a coincidence of opposites at the heart of love: the simultaneity of excess and withdrawal. To love is to move into relation, to give oneself, only by withdrawing, to give oneself *as* a withdrawal. The excess of love is the excess of the spacing, the temporality, that it keeps opening for the other. Love offers itself essentially as *patience*, a letting be of the unique time of beloved, which is simultaneously a kind of weakness, a giving up of control. This is the gift of *freedom*, the freedom given to the other to become singular, in their own time. Love longs for nothing more than for the other to become who they are, to be liberated into their singularity, into their own intimate line of flight.

The dialectic that underwrites this longing for the other's singularity is indicated in two more crucial passages in *Works of Love*:

When...the eternal is in a human being, the eternal reduplicates itself in him in such a way that, at every moment it is in him, it is in him in a double way: in a direction outwards, and in a direction inwards back into itself—but in such a way that this is one and the same, for otherwise it is not a reduplication.⁷⁹

What love does, it is; what it is; it does—and in one and the same moment: in the same moment that it goes out of itself (the direction outwards), it is in itself (the direction inwards); and in the same moment it is in itself, it *thereby* goes out of itself—in such a way that this out-going and this turning-back, this turning-back and this out-going, are simultaneously one and the same.⁸⁰

Kierkegaard here, like Eckhart, collapses the Neoplatonic double movement of emanation and return into a single paradoxical movement. Eckhart writes, “what comes out is what stays within, and what stays within is what comes out.” This is a movement that at one at the same time goes

⁷⁹ WL, 280.

⁸⁰ WL, 280.

out of itself and returns back into itself. The going out *is* the returning and the returning *is* the going out.

What I am suggesting is that this coincidence of opposites should be understood as the dialectic of the hospitality that love is, that God is. God is the holding open of room for the other. And “holding open” expresses the simultaneity of an inward and outward movement. The hinge that opens and holds open the door to the neighbor turns simultaneously inward and outward. It lets the outside in and turns the inside out. The mother that holds an infant withdraws into herself in order to hold open an unconditional attention and care. The therapist that provides a holding environment for a patient withdraws into herself, often into silence, in order to hold open the patient’s presence to himself. The author of edifying discourses withdraws direct communication in order to hold open truth as the reader’s own subjectivity. The body that dances withdraws from every fixed position in order to hold open an excess of movement.⁸¹ Such opening is an *abiding* the uncontrollable advent of the other on the strength of the eternal, including the other that is oneself.

The effect here, again, is a radical de-substantiation of the eternal, of love, and of God, which are all names substitutable for each other. That love’s staying within itself is its out-going and that its out-going is its staying within itself means that love substantializes itself nowhere, neither within being nor beyond being. Love is always arriving and departing simultaneously—making room. Love absolves itself of any place in order to *give* place to the other. Ahead, I will explore how this non-place that gives place is simultaneously *God* and *the soul*. The soul in its unity with God, to use Platonic terminology, is something like the *khora* of the self, the quiet desert out of which the self is birthed, continually. Out in the nothingness of this quiet desert the

⁸¹ One of Kierkegaard’s unused pseudonyms was named “Simon Stylites, Solo Dancer and Private Individual.”

soul is absolutely one with God, one in the instant of God's overflowing withdrawal, one in knowing nothing, one in that impossible, unthinkable instant in which the other is birthed, given room, and welcomed. But first, Kierkegaard on the impossibility of divine intentions.

In a striking passage, Kierkegaard denies the possibility that God could have intentions:

This is why I repeatedly say that God is pure subjectivity, has nothing of objective being in himself which could occasion that he has or must have intentions. Whatever is not purely transparent subjectivity has at some point or another a relationship to its environment, a relationship to an other and has, therefore, must have, intentions. Only that which infinitely subjectively has its subjectivity infinitely in its power as subjectivity, only that has *no intentions*.⁸²

The force of this passage is to evacuate all duality from God, all objectivity through which God could stand *over against* an other and therefore be required to exercise intentionality vis-à-vis this other. This is accomplished above all in the amazing last sentence of this passage that performs the logic of infinite reduplication even on the level of its form: "Only that which infinitely subjectively has its subjectivity infinitely in its power as subjectivity, only that has *no intentions*." This is an even more decisive articulation of the abyssal nature of infinite reduplication than occurs in the two passages I quoted at the beginning of this section. There it was said that God relates "objectively" to God's subjectivity. To be sure, Kierkegaard implicitly erases this objectivity by saying that this is *only* a reduplication of *subjectivity*. But here the erasure becomes explicit. God has God's subjectivity infinitely in God's power as subjectivity *infinitely subjectively*. God relates to God's own subjectivity only in an infinitely subjective way. This is what prevents God's subjectivity from turning into an exercise of intentionality. Intentions require a delimited subject, a relation of subjectivity to its objective nature through which subjectivity can put itself in relation objectively, aiming itself at delimited objects, ends, or goals. Kierkegaard denies that God could act in this way, with intention. Intentions are always

⁸² JP, 1449.

in some measure a reduction of subjectivity to finitude: “whoever has an intention must also will the means...and in that very second he becomes dependent upon finitude.”⁸³ For God to act with intention would be for God to stand over against an object, meaning that God would be *positioned*, and this would be a negation of God’s pure subjectivity, which is God’s abandonment of every position.

This means, radically, that God acts *neither* voluntaristically on the basis of a freely determinable will *nor* necessarily on the basis of a determinate nature. God acts *neither* randomly *nor* teleologically. God acts infinitely. God’s relation to the other, to the self, is not a relation to an object, which would require a position, but a relation to the self’s *subjectivity*, to the *soul*, to what is eternal and infinite in the self. This relation of subjectivity to subjectivity eludes all positioning. It cannot be mapped within a teleological discourse. Within language, it will show itself only as the abandonment of teleological discourse, the loss of all why. God relates *only* to reduplicate *subjectivity* in the creature, only to birth God in the soul, which is to say that God relates only to *edify*, to birth *freedom*, the power and joy of singularity, never to exercise objective intention.

This is not to deny that God has created a world full of bodies and matter, a world full of finitude. It is to say, however, that God absolutely refuses to control that finitude objectively, indeed, God *cannot*. This is God’s “non-relation” to finitude, the absence of intentionality in the divine life, God’s weakness in the world. God lets finitude run wild without controlling it, without exercising intention over it, for good and for ill, allowing the best and the worst to happen. This is a kind of abandonment of creation, a harrowing letting-be. Kierkegaard writes,

⁸³ JP, 1449.

“In a certain sense it may be said that to feel abandoned by God belongs to the proper emptying out of the human being standing face to face before God.”⁸⁴ And further:

[God] is in a certain sense like a natural scientist who relates himself to his experiment: no doubt he is easily capable of getting at something in another way, but he wants to see whether or not it can be produced by the particular procedure of the experiment, and he constrains himself in order to watch the experiment; he waits patiently—yet with infinite interest—... In a certain sense it can be said that there is no providence at all, just as if there were no experimenter or the experimenter were no one, since, after all, he does not intervene but merely lets the concatenated forces develop... [God] will not break in with power.⁸⁵

And yet, even as God abandons creation objectively, God remains infinitely subjectively present to creation with abandon: “And yet the experimenter is *sheer awareness* and *attention* and is constantly present.”⁸⁶ God is absent from creation as some-one, as some determinate sovereign or ruler who exercises intention. But God is infinitely present to creation as “no one,” present not as a determinate subject outfitted with *in-tention*, present instead as sheer *a-tention*, as concern, as love. God is a love that will not control, a love that will only set free, a love that will only hold by holding open. God relates only by attending to and loving creation with infinite subjective passion, unfailingly holding open the space and freedom through which the self, in the moment of faith, is given the power to will itself as an opening, to find the strength to continue to hope and to love amidst the best and the worst—without why.

v

To further elucidate the absence of intentionality in the divine life, I want to turn to Kierkegaard’s paradoxical account of divine omnipotence: divine power exercises itself only as a withdrawal of itself.

⁸⁴ JP, 3903.

⁸⁵ JP, 1450.

⁸⁶ JP, 1450.

In another striking passage, one of those rare ones tucked away in his journals in which his theological presuppositions suddenly burst forth, Kierkegaard sketches the relation between divine omnipotence, human freedom, and creation out of nothing. He writes:

The whole questions of God's omnipotence and the good's relation to evil can perhaps (instead of the distinction, that God effects the good and merely allows evil) be solved quite simply in this way. Above all the highest which can be done for a being, greater than anything else one can do for it, is to make it free. In order to do just that, omnipotence is required. This seems strange, since it is precisely omnipotence which supposedly makes dependent. But if one will reflect on omnipotence, one will see precisely that it also must contain the determination of being able to withdraw itself again in the expression of omnipotence, in such a way that precisely for this reason that which has come into being through omnipotence can be independent. It is for this reason that one human being cannot completely make another free, because the one who has the power is himself entangled in having the power—and therefore the relation to the one he would make free continually goes awry... Only omnipotence can withdraw itself at the same time it gives itself away, and this relationship is the very independence of the receiver. God's omnipotence is therefore God's goodness. For goodness is to give away totally; but in such a way that, by omnipotently retracting itself, it makes the recipient independent. All finite power makes dependent; only omnipotence can make independent: from nothing bring forth that which acquires subsistence in itself through the continual withdrawing of omnipotence itself. Omnipotence is not ensconced in a relationship to an other, for there is no other to which it relates itself—no, it can give but without giving up the least of its power, i.e., it can make independent. This is the incomprehensible thing: that omnipotence manages not merely to bring forth that which is most impressive, the visible totality of the world, but the most fragile of all things, a being independent over against that omnipotence... It is therefore only a wretched and worldly conception of the dialectic of power that it is greater and greater in proportion to that which it can compel and make dependent... For this reason, therefore, if a human being had the slightest independent subsistence over against God in advance (with respect to *materia* [substance]), then God could not make it free. Creation out of nothing is once again omnipotence's expression for being able to make independent. The one to whom I owe absolutely everything, even though he has just as absolutely retained everything, precisely he has made me independent.⁸⁷

The philosophical background of Kierkegaard's account of divine omnipotence and human freedom here is Schelling's *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*. Schelling writes, "Since freedom is unthinkable in contradistinction to omnipotence, is there any other escape from this argument than by placing man and his freedom in the divine being, by

⁸⁷ JP, 1251.

saying that man exists not outside God but in God, and that man's activity itself belongs to God's life?"⁸⁸ With Schelling, Kierkegaard recognizes that no creature could ever be free over against, or "in contradistinction to" omnipotence. If the creature were an external object to the divine omnipotence, "if a human being had the slightest independent subsistence over against God...then God could not make it free." This would entangle God in a "wretched...dialectic of power." Human freedom can emerge only *within* omnipotence itself. Yet how can omnipotence itself be the very space of human freedom, of what is wholly other to itself? Only, as Kierkegaard writes, if it can "withdraw itself at the same time it gives itself away," since "this relationship is the very independence of the receiver." What this points to is that for Kierkegaard (and Schelling), the room held open for creatures is a space that opens *within* the divine life as the divine life withdraws or contracts into itself. This space, I want to suggest, is the "divine nothing," and this nothing is the nothing out of which creatures are birthed *ex nihilo*. The divine life, as it were, eternally abandons itself, "it gives itself away...totally," abandoning itself as any kind of sovereign principle or ground in order to "retain" itself as nothing, nothing but a limitlessly open holding environment for infinitely fragile others.

On Kierkegaard's terms, divine creation is an act of *resignation*, an act that withdraws itself as it acts in order to let the creature be. Johannes Climacus writes, "no one is resigned as God, because he communicates creatively in such a way that in creating he gives independence vis-à-vis himself."⁸⁹ To act "creatively" is to act in order to set the other free. Again, God acts *only* to set free, never to control or exercise intention. There is, however, a paradoxical fold or double movement here that is crucial. The withdrawal of the divine life is not simply an

⁸⁸ Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom* trans. James Gutmann (Peru: Open Court Publishing), 11.

⁸⁹ CUP, 260.

abandonment of the creature. It is simultaneously God's communication of the divine life to the creature, God's giving of the divine life as freedom. God withdraws as a self-giving. God gives the divine life as a withdrawal. The freedom given to the human being, which is its exposure to "the nothing that interlaces existence," is the very freedom of the divine life that shares itself with, that makes room within itself for, the human being. Human freedom vis-à-vis God is a kind of hyperbolic effect of God's own freedom or independence vis-à-vis God, the absence of any objective or necessary principle structuring the divine life, the happening of the divine life in excess of any objectivity or calculation. Divine creation is an excessive act, a throwing open of room without calculation, but not without "concern."⁹⁰ The nothin-ing of the divine life, the infinite reduplication of itself as subjectivity that is its absolution from any necessary position or nature, becomes for the human being, as the gift of its selfhood and freedom, the possibility of its own nothin-ing, its "liberating annihilation,"⁹¹ its openness, its excess, its longing, its faith, its hope, its love, the impossibility of its closure. In withdrawing, therefore, God maintains the most intimate proximity to the creature, withdrawing into an absolute intimacy with the self, an intimacy through which the self opens out absolutely into nothing, into freedom.

At issue here is the un-doing of onto-theological notions of causality, specifically notions that *ground* creaturely effects in a divine cause. The relation between divine cause and creaturely effect, for Kierkegaard, is not a relation of grounding. It is a *hyperbolic* relation, an exposure or exposition of the effect within the *nothin-ing* of the cause, its withdrawal, which constitutes the groundlessness of existence. This why Kierkegaard describes God as a *poet*, rather than, say, as an auto-biographer (which is essentially what Hegel's God is): "God is like a poet."⁹² Between

⁹⁰ EUD, 393.

⁹¹ EUD, 382.

⁹² JP, 1445.

divine cause and creaturely effect there is a hyperbolic relation, the way poetic metaphor performs a kind of hyperbolic transgression of literal, authorial intention and meaning. Creatures are the hyperbolic poetry of the divine life, thrown into existence with abandon.

vi

The site of this abandon, I want to now suggest, is the “soul.” Clarifying this will involve unpacking Kierkegaard’s claim that “God’s omnipotence is therefore God’s goodness.” Divine power relates to communicate the most intimate and delicate freedom, the freedom to will the good, which is the freedom to hope and to love without why, to give birth to the opening that is God, an opening opened by “sinking down into one’s own nothingness.”⁹³ God births this divine opening in the soul specifically, I want to claim, as *Sorg*, as “longing” or “yearning,” which is a kind of broken desire, desire broken open beyond the demand for satisfaction, accomplishment, or a definite object. The soul is where God gives the divine life as a withdrawal, abandoning the self to itself, opening the self as an unquenchable longing for the divine. “God...draws back his hand and opens his arms to receive in them the yearning soul.”⁹⁴ The yearning or longing of the soul, I want to claim, is a reduplication in the self of God’s own longing for God. The soul is the site of the apophatic passion of the divine life for itself as nothing, nothing but an infinite reduplication of itself as an absolute opening.

That the gift of the soul is a gifting into God’s own longing is made clear in Kierkegaard’s communion discourse on Luke 22:15. There he acknowledges to God that “longing is your gift; no one can give it to himself; if it is not given, no one can purchase it, even if he were to sell everything—but when you give it, he can still sell everything in order to

⁹³ EUD, 307.

⁹⁴ EUD, 29.

purchase it.”⁹⁵ He prays, “when longing grasps hold of us, oh, that we may also grasp hold of the longing, when it wants to carry us away, that we may also surrender ourselves.”⁹⁶ Crucially, longing is not a gift external to the divine life; it is the gift *of* the divine life:

What would better be called God’s gifts than every prompting of the Spirit, every pull of the soul, every fervent stirring of the heart, every holy state of mind, every devout longing, which are indeed God’s gifts in a far deeper sense than food and clothing, not only because it is God who gives them but because God gives himself in these gifts!...in the longing itself the eternal *is*, just as God *is* in the longing that is *for* him.⁹⁷

This parallels a statement in another of Kierkegaard’s discourses where he writes, “Spiritually, the fulfillment is always in the wish, the calming of the concern in the concern, just as God is even in the sorrowful longing that is for him.”⁹⁸ Longing here indicates an inceptual birth or opening of desire that is not ordered toward any closure or fulfillment, only toward its own repetition. God, here, is not an *object* of desire, but rather the very *birth* of desire that reaches out for nothing, only for an intensification of its own birth—its reduplication. This is why Kierkegaard states that, in relation to God, indeed, *as God*, longing can only be “increased,”⁹⁹ never “satisfied.”¹⁰⁰ “Longing” indicates an unfinishable economy of excess, one that redoubles on itself: the more the divine gift is given, the more there is longing for the gift, for longing *is* the gift, is God *as* gift, a gift that will never become a possession but one that reduplicates itself, eternally, as gift. Longing reaches out for God only by letting the desire for satisfaction become broken, and this letting go, this throwing open of desire, this gift of a broken heart, is a sinking into nothingness, a becoming capable of nothing, but just so, of everything. It is a becoming empty with the passion, the gift, of the divine life. “God *is* in the longing that is *for* him.”

⁹⁵ CD, 251.

⁹⁶ CD, 251.

⁹⁷ CD, 253, 260.

⁹⁸ EUD, 250.

⁹⁹ CD, 261.

¹⁰⁰ CD, 261.

There is an implicit, incorporative trinitarian logic operative here, the gifting of the human being into God's own longing for God, one that significantly echoes Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic trinitarian theology. In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius speaks of an "ecstatic...divine yearning" that is both the ground of creation and God's gift to the creature. He writes:

It must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all, is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning, and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself... God is yearning on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, pre-existent in the good, flowing out from the good onto all that is and returning once again to the good. [The divine love]... shows especially its unbeginning and unending nature travelling in an endless circle through the good, from the good and to the good; unerringly turning, ever on the same centre, ... always proceeding, always remaining, always being restored to itself... This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved ... This is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had these inspired words to say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul was clearly a lover, and, as he says, he was beside himself for God.¹⁰¹

Kierkegaard's writing of the self in relation to God can be read along these Dionysian, Neoplatonic lines. As I have shown, for Kierkegaard, echoing Dionysius, the divine life is an outgoing, an exceeding of itself, that nevertheless remains within itself as it exceeds itself. The divine life *is* its excess. Specifically, the divine life is "yearning on the move," a yearning that overflows itself into the creature. And in the creature, in the soul, it does not stop moving and overflowing. It reaches no goal or closure or containment. It continues to give birth to itself, without goal, without end, infinitely, excessively. In the soul, in the instant of faith, with wild hope and limitless love, the Spirit infinitely returns, or in Kierkegaard's terms, infinitely repeats forward, the divine life as an unquenchable longing. The Spirit redoubles the divine life as superabundance, as a bottomless economy of gift charged with an infinite passion. "A believer,"

¹⁰¹ *Divine Names*, ch. 4, sec. 13.

Kierkegaard writes, “is a lover; as a matter of fact, when it comes to enthusiasm, the most rapturous lover of all lovers is but a stripling compared with a believer.”¹⁰² A believer is a lover because God is a lover, an infinite lover, abandoned to excess.

To unpack the Neoplatonic provenance of longing as the divine self-gift, let me turn to Kierkegaard’s appropriation of the language and logic of “the good.” He does so in a number of places but perhaps no where more explicitly than in an upbuilding discourse on James 1:17: “Every good and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shadow or variation.” Kierkegaard calls this text his “first love,” indeed his “only love.” He writes, “I could call this text my only love—to which one returns again and again and again and *always*.”¹⁰³ This passage of Scripture births a particularly intense passion in Kierkegaard. This is so because he hears in it the best word of all: the word of an absolute gift, a gift that will never cease to give itself, a gift that one never has to be anxious about acquiring or keeping because it will always already have given itself, eternally. This is a gift that breaks through all doubt and uncertainty by giving itself as a longing, a passion, for nothing. Kierkegaard writes:

What earthly life does not have, what no person has, God alone has, and it is not a perfection on God’s part that he alone has it, but a perfection on the part of the good that a human being, insofar as he participates in the good, does so through God. What, then, is the good? It is that which is from above. What is the perfect? It is that which is from above. Where does it come from? From above. What is the good? It is God. Who is the one who gives it? It is God. Why is the good a gift and this expression not a metaphor but the only real and true expression? Because the good is from God; if it were bestowed on the single individual by the person himself or by some other person, then it would not be the good, nor would it be a gift, but only seemingly so, because God is the only one who gives in such a way that he gives the condition along with the gift, the only one who in giving already has given. God gives both to will and to bring to completion; he begins and completes the good work in a person.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² SUD, 103.

¹⁰³ Pap. XI 3 B 291.

¹⁰⁴ EUD, 134.

The first thing to point out is the trinitarian shape of this passage: God is all at once the giver of the good, the good itself, and the very giving and receiving of the good. Kierkegaard appropriates trinitarian logic and grammar, however, not in order to arrive at a *determination* of the divine identity, as in Hegel, but only to speak of God as an absolute expenditure into which the self is gifted. “It is not a perfection on God’s part that he alone has [the good]”—as if the point were that God *possessed* the good—“but a perfection on the part of the good that a human being, insofar as he participates in the good, does so through God.” The divine perfection is not God’s *possession* of the good. Rather, the perfection of the good is God, namely, that the good is infinitely self-sharing. God is nothing but the self-expenditure or gratuity of the good. This shift from an onto-theological perspective on divine goodness to one in which God is nothing but the good’s own self-sharing is crucial, for it names the impossibility of the speculative moment, the moment of apprehending the divine identity. God will always already have abandoned the possibility of that moment by *giving* God absolutely and totally. In the passion of the gift, there is no time for speculation. There is only the eternal instant of joy, of longing. God is nothing but an event of relation that opens itself, eternally, for the other.

The crucial line in this passage is the following: “God is the only one who gives in such a way that he gives the condition along with the gift, the only one who in giving already has given.” That is, the gift that God gives does not become an external object over against either God or the self, some appropriable good. This would be to introduce the gift into the milieu of objectivity, where it would become uncertain, subject to deconstruction, generating only anxiety about itself, about whether it is truly good. Rather, the gift that God gives doubles itself as the very condition for receiving the gift. Prior to the giving of the gift, there is already a giving that has given itself, and the gift gives itself to this prior, abyssal giving, it doubles itself *as* this prior,

abyssal giving. The gift here maintains itself as a reduplication of itself as it gives itself. That is, it does not give itself by mediating itself into objectivity. It reduplicates and gives itself prior to objectivity, as subjectivity. “The condition,” that is, the subjective posture of reception, the hospitality of the soul that gives itself to receiving the gift, is itself “a gift of God and a perfection that makes it possible to receive the good and perfect gift.”¹⁰⁵ This forms the gift as an excessive feedback loop redoubled on itself, not closed into itself but excessively open and generous. In another discourse, Kierkegaard expresses this redoubling of the divine life in its gifts by echoing a line of Eckhart’s: “God gives not only the gifts but himself with them.”¹⁰⁶

One could say that the instant the gift gives itself it withdraws into, or doubles itself as, the condition for receiving the gift. The condition for receiving the gift *is* the gift. The gift is nothing but its own condition, its own possibility. The gift is nothing but an openness to the gift, an openness to itself as openness. The gift is *nothing*, nothing but a readiness to receive, a readiness to receive *nothing*, nothing but its own readiness to receive. This is infinite reduplication. The gift here knows nothing of the distinction between possibility and actuality. Its actuality is its possibility, and this possibility is the very possibility of the impossible, the impossibility of the gift as any appropriable good. The gift, one could say, is simply *hospitality*.

Contra Hegel, the absolute never gives itself *into appearance*. It never comes under the gaze of phenomenological intention. It is always slipping away in order to hold itself away from knowledge, in order to hold itself, and the creature, open. On Kierkegaard’s terms, there could be no “phenomenology of spirit.” For him, the absolute gives itself only *into withdrawal*. Or any phenomenology of spirit could only proceed by tracing the disappearance of the absolute, its infinite withdrawal that shows itself only indirectly in the most fragile of traces, glimpsed and

¹⁰⁵ EUD, 137.

¹⁰⁶ EUD, 99. Eckhart: “In all God’s gifts, God gives only himself.”

struggled for but not possessed.¹⁰⁷ The absolute gives itself only by maintaining itself, reduplicating itself, as the instant of *beginning* prior to any presence, one that never shows itself as a result, as anything accomplished or objective. The gift is perfect because it is nothing, nothing but an infinite beginning, the instant of opening, the instant of hospitality.

The final turn to make here is to clarify exactly what the gift as “condition” is. What is the condition? In the discourse on the James text, Kierkegaard goes on to develop the condition for receiving the gift as the “need” for God. To need God, to need the gift, is the condition for receiving the gift and as such *is* the gift. However, need here needs to be carefully distinguished from any kind of lack that seeks its own filling up, fulfillment, or satisfaction. To need God is qualitatively different from needing any earthly object, which is why Kierkegaard writes that “earthly need is so far from illuminating it by analogy that it darkens it instead.”¹⁰⁸ Need here, is not a lack. It is a “perfection”—“The need itself is a good and a perfect gift from God...and the communication of it is a good and a perfect gift from above.”¹⁰⁹ God communicates the divine life as a good and perfect gift as God communicates the need for God. God communicates God’s own need for God.

What I want to suggest here is that “need” should be interpreted as *longing*. To need God is to long for God. This is not to desire any specific object or outcome, but to long simply to be with and in God, hidden in God’s gentle arms. In an upbuilding discourse titled, “To Need God is a Human Being’s Highest Perfection,” Kierkegaard writes:

Then in a beautiful sense the human heart will gradually (the grace of God is never taken by force) become more and more discontented—that is, it will desire more and more ardently, will long more and more intensely, to be assured of grace... With respect to the earthly, one needs little, and to the degree that one needs less, the more perfect one is... In

¹⁰⁷ This is why Kierkegaard will develop his christology under the category of the “divine incognito.” God shows God in Jesus only as a hiding, as a disappearing.

¹⁰⁸ EUD, 139.

¹⁰⁹ EUD, 139.

a human being's relationship to God, it is inverted: the more he needs God, the more deeply he comprehends that he is in need of God, then the more he in his need presses forward to God, the more perfect he is...the secret of perfection: that to need God is nothing to be ashamed of but is perfection itself, and that it is the saddest thing of all if a human being goes through life without discovering that he needs God.¹¹⁰

To long to be assured of grace is to long to know, or rather, to *feel*, to feel ever more deeply, that there is nothing to accomplish, that the good has already been given, that the opening has already opened and is opening every instant, that one is already loved, as nothing, that the anxious quest for identity and achievement is a desperate illusion, that all there is to do is to become undone with gratitude, to sink into one's nothingness, into the nothin-ing of God's arms that embrace the yearning soul. Kierkegaard writes, "If I am infinitely, infinitely a nobody...then it is eternally, eternally certain that God loves me."¹¹¹ And further:

God gives not only the gifts but himself with them in a way beyond the capability of any human being, who can be present in the gift only in a feeling or in a mood, not essentially, cannot penetrate infinitesimally the total content of the gift, cannot be completely present in the whole gift, even less completely present in the least part of it.¹¹²

The gift withdraws from presence into the fragility and hiddenness of the heart where it births itself, infinitely, as longing, as a longing for nothing. And again, the feedback loop here is infinite: God infinitely longs for the creature to feel that there is nothing to accomplish, that it is loved absolutely, as nothing. And because there is *infinitely* nothing to accomplish, because existence gapes open without why, as a sheer gift, there is no end to the joy of becoming nothing. There are always infinitely deeper depths of the gift, of nothing, into which one may sink.

The earnestness lies in God's passion to love and to be loved, yes, almost as if he were himself bound in this passion, O, infinite love, so that in the power of this passion he

¹¹⁰ EUD, 303.

¹¹¹ JP, 1426.

¹¹² EUD, 99.

cannot stop loving, almost as if it were a weakness, although it is rather his strength, his omnipotent love. This is the measure of his unswerving love.¹¹³

vii

In *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes the following:

“God” could be the name that, as a proper noun, names the unnamable and, as a common noun, designates the division *dies/nox*, day and night, opening the rhythm of the world, the possibility of distinctions in general, and therefore of relation and of passage.

But we can erase this sign if it begins to dominate, take control, subjugate: it then becomes contradictory, in effect, as it annuls passage, annuls us as passers-by, attempts to fix us permanently before altars, temples, books. This is what happens, perhaps unavoidably, in all the theological and metaphysical determinations of “God,” and it is perhaps impossible for this name, as for any other, not to be determined in some way. It is perhaps impossible for this name to retain the movement, the trembling of the gap and the passage.

“God” should only be named in passing, and as a passer-by.¹¹⁴

This is the apophatic direction in which I want to read Kierkegaard’s ~~concept~~ of God. “God” names nothing, nothing but the unconditioned openness of existence, the instant of gift and relation that opens everywhere, from nowhere, an opening touched only with longing, not any concept. And were “God” to become instead the name of a closure, an object, an objective, a binding instead of a loosening, a demand rather than a letting-be, an identity rather than an affect—the joy and sorrow of existence—then in the name of God let us erase the name of God, let us pray God to rid us of God. Kierkegaard writes, “when the unconditioned does not exist for human beings, what good is it to have something one calls God but which is only a name?”¹¹⁵ God is worthy of adoration not as any name, but only as the unconditioned. Not an unconditioned object, “God cannot be an object,” but an unconditioned opening. Before this opening, one can only become nothing, nothing but a passer-by, traveling with the speed of longing from nothing toward nothing, facing the divine only by facing a wink—*Øieblikket*—a

¹¹³ JP, 1445.

¹¹⁴ Nancy, *Adoration*, 78.

¹¹⁵ JP, 4918.

withdrawal, a passing, a passion, the gift of...nothing...a *nihil* without -ism, pregnant with surprised, unspeakable joy.

CHAPTER IV

FAITH: ACTION TO EXCESS

...she affirms nothing, she acts... – Kierkegaard¹

To become sober is: to come so close to oneself in one's understanding, in one's knowing, that all one's understanding becomes action. –Kierkegaard²

To become nothing before God, and nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged.³ – Kierkegaard

i

This chapter marks a shift in this dissertation, one toward a more direct look at the so-called “theological virtues”—faith, hope, and love. Kierkegaard’s apophaticism, I have been emphasizing, is at heart about a lived enactment, a becoming nothing. In this he parallels Eckhart, for whom apophasis is not primarily an epistemological problematic concerning the unknowability of the divine (although it is this, too) but concerns more centrally an apophatic comportment within existence that enacts a de-centering and undoing of the knowing subject itself. Eckhart’s categories of *Gelassenheit* and *Gottesburt* express the existential core of his apophasis. Apophasis is an event, the birth of God in the soul, which is the becoming nothing of the soul, its letting go of things, a letting-be, a making room for what cannot be discursively known or possessed. I have worked to show that Kierkegaard’s writing of the self before God can be read entirely along these lines.

What I would like to do with the remainder of this dissertation is hone in on apophasis as an existential enactment, to show how the movements of faith, hope, and love are apophatic

¹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 273.

² JFY, 115.

³ JFY, 106.

movements. This will involve showing how these “virtues” negate or release themselves as virtues. Anti-Climacus writes, “this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.”⁴ Before examining faith specifically, however, I would like to speak more generally about how Kierkegaard construes the relationship between religious subjectivity and virtue, in particular how religious subjectivity undoes or exceeds virtue. This will allow me an opportunity to bring Kierkegaard into conversation with that mystic who said farewell to the virtues—Marguerite Porete.

ii

Faith, hope, and love, for Kierkegaard, do not name an acquiring of potencies or the supernatural elevation of already given natural endowments. They are “not a *direct* heightening of the natural life in a person in *immediate* continuation from and connection with it.”⁵ They name instead an emptying of the self, a “dying to,” an “annihilation,” in which the self abides in “the continual understanding that I am able to do nothing at all.”⁶ Paradoxically, this self-emptying is simultaneously the “ability to do everything,”⁷ that is, the ability to undertake every movement absolutely freely, without why, outside of oneself, eccentrically, without seeking to translate one’s action into any kind of result, accrual, momentum, or identity that one would become anxious about protecting or perfecting. The annihilated soul lets go of every work the instant it is performed. It works only to let go, only to empty, only to sink into nothing. Such annihilation does not result in apathy or quietism. It is, rather, the condition for an infinite engagement with

⁴ SUD, 82.

⁵ FSE, 76.

⁶ WL, 363.

⁷ WL, 362.

existence, yet one without teleological ground: “to become nothing before God, and nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged.”⁸

This does, of course, mean that Kierkegaard moves at slant in relation to a significant, perhaps the dominant, stream of Christian reflection on the virtues. Representing this stream, Paul DeHart writes:

The Catholic tradition speaks of faith and charity as theological “virtues” precisely because they represent the elevation and disposition of already naturally given human capacities for knowing and willing. Although this elevation is not merited or effected in any way by the human being, once initiated by God it allows a new range and efficaciousness to human action, which is related to excellence in cognition, affection, and self-direction.⁹

For Kierkegaard, by contrast, faith, hope, and love are not an elevation into excellence. They are more nearly a descent into madness where “lunacy and truth are ultimately indistinguishable.”¹⁰

In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio writes:

There was one who was great by virtue of his power, and one who was great by virtue of his wisdom, and one who was great by virtue of his love, but Abraham was the greatest of all, great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by the love that is hatred to oneself.¹¹

In *For Self-Examination* in a discourse on the Spirit’s gifts of faith, hope, and love, Kierkegaard writes:

Faith is against understanding; faith is on the other side of death. And when you have died or died to yourself, to the world, then you also died to all immediacy in yourself, also to your understanding. It is when all confidence in yourself or in human support, and also in God in an immediate way, is extinct, when every probability is extinct, when it is dark as on a dark night—it is indeed death we are describing—then comes the life-giving Spirit and brings faith.¹²

⁸ JFY, 106.

⁹ Paul DeHart, in *The Gift of Theology: The Contribution of Kathryn Tanner*. eds. Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 35.

¹⁰ CUP, 194.

¹¹ FTR, 16-7. Cf. Eckhart’s sermon “He Who Hates His Soul In This World,” translated in full in Shurmann, *Wandering Joy*, 47-50.

¹² FSE, 82.

Kierkegaard's emptying out of human capability and virtue is not, however, simply a function of his Protestantism, of an anxiety about "works righteousness" accompanied by a concern to keep human sinfulness or depravity total, that is, without the possibility of elevation or healing in this life. Kierkegaard's break from the virtue tradition, I want to claim, rests on a deeper, *apophatic* negation, namely, the impossibility of either God or the self to *be* or *have* anything at all. For Kierkegaard, there is simply no substantive self that could accrue virtue, just as there is no substantive God who could give virtue. What God gives and what the self receives in the movements of faith, hope, and love is the gift, the birth, of nothing, the freedom to become nothing. Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses do not build the self up into virtue. They build the self upside-down into nothing. They edify by leading the self into its own nothingness.

Kierkegaard writes:

The highest is this: that a person is fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing, nothing at all...This is the annihilation of a person, and the annihilation is his truth...To comprehend this annihilation is the highest thing of which a human being is capable...yet what I am I saying—he is incapable even of this; at most he is capable of being willing to understand that this smoldering brand only consumes until the fire of God's love ignites the blaze in what the smoldering brand could not consume...Thus a human being is great and at his highest when he corresponds to God by being nothing at all himself...And the person who understood this found no pain whatsoever in it but only the overabundance of bliss, who hid no secret desire that still preferred to be happy on its own account, felt no shame that people noticed that he himself was capable of nothing at all, laid down no conditions to God, not even that his weakness be kept concealed from others, but in whose heart joy constantly prevailed by his, so to speak jubilantly throwing himself into God's arms in unspeakable amazement at God, who is capable of all things.¹³

Kierkegaard here is essentially articulating a moment of mystical union, a complete emptying out of the self and its abandonment into God. This involves an apophatic emptying out or letting go of human capability and virtue, which is, however, simultaneously the discovery of a wholly different capability, the capaciousness and roominess of God's arms that demand nothing and

¹³ EUD, 307, 309, 311, 318.

give everything. This is a capability, a throwing open, wholly beyond the possibility of possession, use, or conscription into any project or progress toward self-mastery. The self has access to this capability, this capaciousness, only as it abides with itself as nothing, nothing at all.

Again, this is not simply a Protestant gesture. It is a gesture found also on the margins of the Catholic tradition, chiefly in the mystics. It is found in Eckhart in his untiring insistence that to relate to God is to relate to a nothingness into which the self must sink:

“Then how should I love God?” You should love him as he is a nonGod, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright “One,” separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of “something” into “nothing.” May God help us do that.¹⁴

Such annihilation of the self in God is found also in several of Eckhart’s predecessors and teachers, one of which was Marguerite Porete. For Porete, the “annihilated soul” abandoned into God abides in a position, or rather non-position, beyond or prior to the acquisition of virtue. She explicitly comes out against the virtues in her *Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls and Those Who Only Remain in Will and Desire of Love*. She writes:

Virtues, I take my leave of you forever.
I will possess a heart most free and gay;
... You know that I was to you totally abandoned;
I had placed my heart completely in you, you know well.
Thus I lived a while in great distress,
I suffered in many grave torments, many pains endured.
Miracle it is that I have somehow escaped alive.
This being so, I no longer care; I am parted from you,
For which I thank God on high; good for me this day.¹⁵

The virtues, for Porete, structure human existence toward the formation of a determinate self, a formation that for her was full of distress, torment, and pain. The virtues concern the self’s acquisition and possession of its own goodness. For Porete, however, goodness possessed,

¹⁴ ME, 208.

¹⁵ Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (Paulist, 1993), 6. Hereafter MSS.

goodness achieved by virtue of some “why,” some need to become something and someone, is no goodness at all. The only goodness Porete is interested in is the goodness that arrives “without myself,” which is goodness that gives itself “without any why.”¹⁶ Such goodness is that which was there at the beginning, radically prior to any relationship to a determinate self, the goodness that loved the self into existence when it was nothing, nothing at all.

Porete wants to abide in this beginning *ex nihilo*, in the instant of this love—a love that loves nothings and nobodies. She wants to be loved as absolutely nothing, for no reason at all. Through the abandonment of all human capability and virtue, annihilation returns the self to this state of nothingness in which the self is without itself, in which the self is nothing but the instant of its being given into existence without itself, without why. “And I cannot be in [God] unless he places me there of himself without myself, just as when he made me by himself without myself. This is uncreated goodness.”¹⁷ Such a love births “a heart most free and gay,” a heart that has abandoned the quest for achievement, identity, and recognition, a heart that has thrown itself into the sheer joy of being nothing. This is a heart alive only on the utter gratuity of its birth out of nothing, alive only on the grace of the instant. And so Porete takes leave of the virtues because the virtues are not content with letting the self be loved as nothing and nobody. The virtues cannot abide annihilation. They are anxious to get beyond being nothing, to produce a self that will be loved as something, as someone.

Having left behind the virtues, having sunk into the nothingness where there is nothing but the instant of coming into existence, an instant not aimed at anything beyond itself, annihilated souls no longer have any determinate standard by which to measure themselves. They are beyond good and evil, set adrift on an open sea. Porete writes, they “do not know how

¹⁶ MSS, 183.

¹⁷ MSS, 183.

to consider themselves good or evil, no longer possessing understanding of themselves, nor knowing how to judge if they are converted or perverted.”¹⁸ Annihilation leaves the self unable to represent itself to itself, unable to know itself, unable to assure itself of its own goodness or condemn itself for any evil.¹⁹

Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* is a dramatic staging of a very similar kind of undecidability. Is Abraham’s obedience to God in his willingness to slay his son conversion or perversion? From the point of view of “the ethical” it is of course perverse, just as Porete’s taking leave of the virtues was considered perverse by her inquisitors. Faith, however, “suspends” the ethical, takes leave of it, and opens a higher position. To sink into this higher position one must radically unknow oneself, leaving behind all calculation and the desire to secure and recognize one’s own goodness. Looking into the divine mirror, one does not see one’s own virtue. One sees nothing. One “is blinded.”²⁰ In the instant of faith (and hope and love), one is carried not by the assurance of one’s virtue, but “by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago.”²¹ Again, this is not excellence; it is madness, “the divine madness.”²² Kierkegaard: “Humanly speaking, Abraham is mad and cannot make himself understandable to anyone. And yet ‘to be mad’ is the mildest expression.”²³ Porete: “Theologians and other clerks, You will not have the intellect for this...No matter how brilliant your abilities.”²⁴

¹⁸ MSS, 9.

¹⁹ Such unknowing of the self appears also in Eckhart. See ME, 201: “A man who would possess this poverty ought to live as if he does not even know that he is not in any way living for himself or for the truth or for God. Rather, he should be so free of all knowing that he does not experience or grasp that God lives in him...A man should be set as free of his own knowing as he was when he was not. Let God perform what he will, and let man be free.”

²⁰ FTR, 22.

²¹ FTR, 36.

²² FTR, 23.

²³ FTR, 76.

²⁴ MSS, 8.

To exist beyond virtue, however, is not to exist in *opposition* to virtue. This would be to take a determinate position, the position of evil, perhaps, which is not beyond good and evil. Beyond good and evil lies no *position* at all, “a thing which one cannot say.”²⁵ Or perhaps: the tremulous father of faith and the rebellious mystic exist *between* good and evil, not as some happy medium but as the fracture at the heart of this binary that causes the whole edifice of virtue to tremble. Each is the short-circuit at the heart of the system that lets it fail, in an instant. This is why Porete writes that the annihilated soul “neither wills nor not-wills anything which might be named here.”²⁶ And further: “Such Souls possess better the virtues than any other creature, but they do not possess the practice of them, for these Souls no longer belong to the virtues as they used to.”²⁷ The annihilated soul is so free of the virtues so as to not even be in opposition to them. She relates to them absolutely freely, from an unsayable (non)position, neither here nor there, neither this nor that.

Again, a parallel can be drawn with *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham’s “taking leave” of Isaac, his sacrifice of Isaac, which puts him “beyond” recognizable virtue, is always at the same instant his getting Isaac back freely, as a gift. This is a gift, however, that is received only through its dis-possession, through the gift *of* dis-possession. Abraham receives Isaac *by* letting him go. The letting go *is* the reception. This is the posture of *Gelassenheit*, a posture that will not possess anything, not even its own virtue. And yet this refusal to possess is exactly how *Gelassenheit* welcomes and receives everything, only it receives everything beyond representational or teleological framing. Abraham receives Isaac back not as a son that he possesses, but as a gift, as a neighbor. Dispossessing those most intimate to us, those we are most

²⁵ MSS, 172.

²⁶ MSS, 127.

²⁷ MSS, 8.

tempted grasp and control for our benefit is an act of madness, an act of “love that is hatred to oneself.”

The knight of faith, therefore, is *neither* a slave to the ethical *nor* its enemy. He is a “tightrope dancer”²⁸ within it, without determinate position, trembling on a razor’s edge, dancing freely by virtue of the absurd. This is “the one and only marvel.”²⁹

For Porete, to take leave of the virtues is not to rise in arrogance above them, but to sink below them, into “humility,” which is the “mother of virtues,”³⁰ where she receives her life and joy from absolutely beyond herself, not even from her own humility. Porete refuses to rise into the “practice” of the virtues, that is, into a teleological trajectory in which growth in virtue indicates the formation of a determinate subject outfitted with potency and self-mastery. She abides with the mother, not with the mother’s children. That is, she abides in the instant of *birth* that falls always prior to identity, recognition, and self-possession. In the instant of birth one *is* nothing and one *has* nothing, and yet one is loved absolutely *as* nothing. For Porete, this is pure joy, better than any determinate recognition, better than any quest for identity and achievement. The self is freed to love itself absolutely, without why. Porete writes:

Such [an annihilated] Soul, says Love, swims in the sea of joy, that is, in the sea of delights, flowing and running out of the Divinity. And so she feels no joy, for she is joy itself. She swims and flows in joy, without feeling any joy, for she dwells in Joy and Joy dwells in her. She is Joy itself by virtue of the Joy which transforms her into joy itself.³¹

Notice here the undoing of self-reflexivity. The annihilated soul *feels* no joy for she *is* joy itself.

The annihilated soul has sunk entirely into her affect, into the sheer joy of existence that births itself without why. Affect is not directed toward any end; it is not brought under the domain of

²⁸ FTR, 36.

²⁹ FTR, 36.

³⁰ MSS, 88.

³¹ MSS, 28.

reason; it is not conscripted into the production of a determinate subject. It is simply allow to be, allowed to expand itself limitlessly, like the open sea. To act out of such joy is to act without the anxiety of securing some determinate end, or some determinate self. It is to allow action to become reduplicated upon itself, never moving beyond the instant of its beginning. The annihilated soul “takes account of neither shame nor honor, of neither poverty nor wealth, of neither anxiety nor ease, of neither love nor hate, of neither hell nor of paradise.”³² Such a soul withdraws from a calculated relationship to the world, opening existence to the instant of its birth in which its joy will always already have been given, and given again—without why.

Such joy without virtue is echoed in Kierkegaard’s discourses on the lilies and the birds, those “joyful,” “kind,” and “humane” teachers “so worthy of their divine appointment,”³³ sent to teach the self how to sink into its own joy. In a discourse on “care,” Kierkegaard writes:

The bird is what it is, is itself, is satisfied with being itself, is contented with itself. It hardly knows distinctly or realizes clearly what it is, even less that it should know something about others. But it is contented with itself and with what it is, whatever that happens to be. It does not have time to ponder or even merely to begin to ponder—so contented it is with being what it is. In order to be, in order to have the joy of being, it does not have to walk the long road of first learning to know something about the others in order by that to find out what it is itself. No, it has its knowledge firsthand; it takes the more pleasurable short-cut: it is what it is. For the bird there is no questions of to be or not to be; by way of the shortcut it slips past all the cares of dissimilarity. Whether it is a bird just like all other birds, whether it is “just as good a bird” as the others of the same species, indeed, even whether it is just like its mate—of all such things it does not think at all, so impatient it is in its joy of being. No young girl on the point of leaving for a dance can be as impatient to leave as the bird is to set about being what it is. It has not a moment, not the briefest, to give away if this would delay it from being; the briefest moment would be a fatally long time for it if at that moment it was not allowed to be what it is; it would die of impatience at the least little objection to being summarily allowed to be. It is what it is...It lets things take their course, and so it is. This is indeed the way it is.³⁴

³² MSS, 7.

³³ CD, 10.

³⁴ CD, 37-8.

The bird has the immediate joy of being what it is without the detour through achievement, without the anxiety of identity rooted in comparison. The bird abides in the inceptual instant of its existence, in the sheer joy of existing. This is its “fortunate privilege,”³⁵ that it simply is what it is, always already reduplicated upon itself. Human beings, however, have the burden of being always already past their own immediacy, past the instant of their birth. Human consciousness is structured by “care,” by the projection of temporal possibilities and by the anxiety of needing to be and achieve something in the world in comparison with others. “On what is its care based? On existing only for the others, on not knowing anything but the relation to the others.”³⁶ Such is human consciousness’ despairing alienation from itself, its desire to be something in comparison with others rather than nothing. “Oh, what a slyly concealed snare, one that is not set for any bird!”³⁷

The movements of faith, hope and love, however, are not an “elevation” of this care structure, its infusion with supernatural potency. They are, rather, its undoing, its annihilation. They move the self away from care, toward its own nothingness, throwing the self toward an opening not framed by care in which the self becomes “like the free bird when it soars highest in its joy over existing.”³⁸ This is a movement in which one lets go of care (Porete: “I no longer care”), gives up one’s potency for temporal projection, one’s virtue, and sinks into the eternal, purely reduplicated instant of one’s coming into existence, into joy itself. Faith does not, in care, appropriate the self’s *death* in order to discover its “ownmost possibility,” as in Heidegger’s

³⁵ CD, 39.

³⁶ CD, 41. The linguistic correlate to care is, for Kierkegaard, “chatter.” Chatter is empty speech meant to cover over the anxiety into which care has thrust the self. These are, of course, categories that Heidegger takes over directly from Kierkegaard.

³⁷ CD, 39.

³⁸ CD, 47.

Being and Time. Faith appropriates—sinks into—the self’s *birth* prior to care, the instant of *Gottesburt*, in order to abide in the joy of releasement, even in the moment of death.³⁹

This is, for Kierkegaard, to abide “at the beginning,”⁴⁰ working continually to let go of every projection, every desire to be something or someone that would carry one out of this beginning into the anxiety of care. This is a supremely difficult beginning to sink into and maintain—indeed, it is impossible, humanly speaking. It is the self’s “difficult beginning in reduplication [*Fordoblelse*] to be itself.”⁴¹ The self must struggle backward toward itself, toward the instant of beginning prior to care. This is the struggle for repetition.

Yet everything in the self wants to put itself ecstatically past itself, past the instant of beginning, past the sheer joy of existence into the anxiety of care that always concerns itself with preserving and enacting its capacity to be and do something. To learn faith and hope and love, however, is to learn a different ecstasy, a different becoming, a different spacing of the self from itself—an apophatic ecstasy, becoming, and spacing that is infinitely, qualitatively different. Faith, hope, and love abide in an eternal beginning that infinitely reduplicates itself, a beginning without end, an opening without closure, a departure without arrival. Faith, hope, and love move forward only by moving backward; they move outward only by moving inward; they rise high only by sinking deep.⁴² Or rather, they undo all directionality and teleology. This is not the virile,

³⁹ “When the couch of death is prepared for you, when you go to bed never to get up again and they are only waiting for you to turn to the other side to die, and the stillness grows around you—then when those close to you gradually leave and the stillness grows because only those closest to you remain, while death comes closer to you; then when those closest to you leave quietly and the stillness grows because only the most intimate ones remain; and then when the last one has bent over you for the last time and turns to the other side because you yourself are now turning to the side of death—there still remains one on that side, the last one by the deathbed, he who was the first, God, the living God—that is, if your heart was pure, which it became only by loving him.” WL, 150.

⁴⁰ CD, 40.

⁴¹ CD, 41.

⁴² “In actuality, no one ever sank so deep that he could not sink deeper, and there may be one or many who sank deeper. But he who sank in possibility—his eye become dizzy, his eye became confused, so he could not grasp the measuring stick that Tom, Dick, and Harry hold out as a saving straw to one sinking; his ear was closed so he could not hear what the market price of men was in his own day, did not hear that he was just as good as the majority. He

potent ecstasy of virtue that appropriates its own possibilities. It is the “liberating annihilation”⁴³ of “jubilantly throwing [oneself] into God’s arms in unspeakable amazement.”⁴⁴ Within such unsayable, jubilant thrownness, the self is repeated and reduplicated not as something or someone, but as nothing and nobody, as an open sea of joy 70,000 fathoms deep.

iii

I want now to turn specifically to faith. The central point I wish to make here is that faith, for Kierkegaard, is an eternally reduplicated beginning, and as such an inexorable *enactment*, a work, a movement, an action. It is action, however, without object, without objective, action redoubled on itself, action without why. Precisely because it has no object faith is nothing but action, an activation, a tension without intention, a movement without rest, or a resting in movement that stretches out toward what will always elude any grasp or apprehension. Faith is apophatic action, action as releasement, as *Gelassenheit*. It is the motion in which the self wills itself as nothing, nothing but the instant of beginning, of opening, departing before an absolute incommensurability.

Faith, therefore, is to be distinguished from any determinate belief. Faith is an active open-*ing* that will not rest content with or limit itself to any determinate doctrine, concept, religious object, or religious work—to any person, image, book, institution, sacramental system, charity project, social cause, etc. It orients itself to what is beyond determination, to the unsayable, unachievable, and unenforceable. It is not, however, that determinate belief (or practice) is simply absent from the movement of faith, as if faith simply substituted “nothing” or “indetermination” for its object. Faith is so radically without object, so unable to impose itself,

sank absolutely, but then in turn he emerged from the depth of the abyss lighter than all the troublesome and terrible things in life.” CA, 158.

⁴³ EUD, 382.

⁴⁴ EUD, 318.

that it cannot simply *oppose* belief. It is rather that, insofar as faith is at work within determinate belief, which will always in some form be present, belief is opened beyond itself, toward what it cannot contain or represent or enforce, toward what can only be *lived* as an undergoing, a passion, an unknowing, a risk, an uncertainty. Faith is the trembling of belief.

It is here where I would like to address the issue of Kierkegaard's christology and its relationship to the apophaticism I have been tracing. Does not Kierkegaard, as a Christian, regard Jesus as an object of belief? I would like to offer a reading of Kierkegaard's christology, by no means exhaustive, that hones in on its apophatic and kenotic moment, the moment in which Jesus withdraws as an objective telos of belief and becomes instead an opening of apophatic action beyond belief. This is, I want to suggest, the existential heart of Kierkegaard's christology, the moment when faith lets go even of Jesus as any kind objective grounding point, the moment when faith relates to Jesus not as a given object, or as an indemnification against the terror of existence, but as an opening of existence onto action, an opening that releases itself from any determinate objectification. Jesus names not any determinate revelation, or even salvation understood as a fullness of presence, but the "divine incognito," "the most profound incognito,"⁴⁵ God's giving of the divine life in time and history only as a withdrawal that opens the passion of faith. Kierkegaard's writing of Jesus as the "prototype" [*Forbilledede*] of faith, that which faith is to "re-image" [*For-billedede*] or repeat, names this withdrawal of Jesus as a determinate object of belief and the opening of a space of apophatic action, an opening Kierkegaard calls "contemporaneity," the silent birth of the present in action.

My reading of faith as action here is simply a further a elaboration of Johannes Climacus' slogan, "truth is subjectivity." Truth is not anything that faith could apprehend as an object or an

⁴⁵ PC, 128.

objective, even when it is named “Jesus.” Jesus, Kierkegaard writes, is nothing but “the silent and voracious eloquence of action.”⁴⁶ Jesus communicates no objective content or purpose, only the silent opening of his action that exceeds purpose. “Christ did not establish any doctrine; he acted.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Jesus’ action is a descent into “abasement,” where he abides and hides as a “sign of contradiction,”⁴⁸ as Anti-Climacus puts it. Such a sign signifies no-thing; it refers to no transcendental signified, one could say. It signifies—reduplicates—only itself as an absolute coincidence of opposites, the paradoxical simultaneity of the eternal truth and a singular, frail human being who gives himself in love to the least. Such a paradox cannot be grasped by the understanding or made the foundation of a system of knowledge or belief. It will not underwrite the production of any sovereign, self-possessed subject, a “faithful believer” or an “accomplished theologian.” In relation to Jesus there can be no faith-fullness, no accomplishment. There is only the trembling of faith before an absolute paradox.

The paradox of the eternal opening itself in time, as the time of the abased Jesus, a time pregnant with eternity, full only with expectancy and therefore withdrawn from any drive toward accomplishment or possession,⁴⁹ cannot be digested by thought. It can only be apophatically willed and re-birthed in the passion of faith, repeated in one’s own lived existence as the paradoxical simultaneity of one’s own singular, frail existence and its eternal validity and weight, a weight and seriousness that makes itself felt in the exigency to give oneself in love and mercy as Jesus did. Truth is the very passion of faith (and hope and love). It is the silent and

⁴⁶ PC, 14.

⁴⁷ JP, 412.

⁴⁸ PC, 124ff.

⁴⁹ “[Jesus] would go about his life unconcerned about the distribution of worldly goods, as he who owns nothing and wishes to own nothing, unconcerned about where his next meal will come from, just as are the birds of the air, unconcerned about house or home, as he who has no sanctuary nor place to rest and seeks none. Unconcerned about burying the dead, without taking any notice of things that ordinarily attract people’s attention, not bound to any woman, captivated by her in such a way that he desires to please her, but seeking only the disciple’s love.” PF, 56.

voracious eloquence of action that occurs as a singular relation to that which withdraws from objective apprehension or use. Action here has nothing to do with busyness or with projects. God is not useful. Faith does not simply get things done. “If inwardness is truth, results are nothing but junk with which we should not bother one another.”⁵⁰ Faith names a movement that exceeds every determinable project.

One of the more direct articulations of this non-objective passion occurs in the *Postscript*, where Johannes Climacus offers his (in)famous unhinging of the passion of faith from objective belief. He writes that one is brought into relation with God:

not by virtue of any objective deliberation but by virtue of the infinite passion of inwardness... If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol.⁵¹

What Climacus writes here applies also to christology and its liturgical and ethical extensions. The most doctrinally impeccable representation of Jesus as the truth, one that would arouse the admiration of the most brilliant of theologians, or a perfectly executed eucharistic liturgy to the delight of the bishop, or an absolutely faithful exposition of the Bible, or even a work of love that moves a crowd to tears, if it does not communicate the apophatic passion of faith, but rather the assurance of rightly articulated and practiced belief, is in fact *untruth*, an idol, a noisy gong or clanging symbol, as Paul puts it (1 Cor. 13:1). All such performances fall under aesthetic representations of the truth, which are never as such edifying, or are edifying only as they allow themselves to be undone in a passion that exceeds them: “To see the great artist finishing his masterpiece is a glorious and uplifting sight, but it is not upbuilding. Suppose this masterpiece

⁵⁰ CUP, 242.

⁵¹ CUP, 200-1.

was a marvelous piece; if, now, the artist, out of love for a person, smashed it to pieces—then this sight would be upbuilding.”⁵² The truth is always only that which is lived apophatically, beyond positive articulation in the passion of faith that shatters objective belief and practice.⁵³

This is simply another way of saying that all theological discourse, including christology, and all religious practice, must always put itself under erasure, under the sign of the cross. Even theologies of the cross, to which Kierkegaard’s christology belongs, and the practices that flow out of them, no matter how “radical” or “faithful” or “shattering,” must also put themselves under the sign of the cross where they are to tremble with their own uncertainty and undecidability. Theological discourse and practice can claim no stable or determinate position or faithfulness, not even when they take up the position of critique (which itself must always come under critique). They live toward the truth only by virtue of the passion of faith they cannot contain but that, at their best, they can only work to release, letting go of the anxiety to keep the movement of faith within proper, safe, delimited boundaries. This is, of course, to allow the passion of faith, its enactment, to overflow the bounds of Christian orthodoxy—or any orthodoxy⁵⁴—not because Christian orthodoxy is an enemy to destroy, but because it contains within itself an uncontainable event, an opening, an action, a passion that is alive only as it

⁵² WL, 214.

⁵³ Further, on Climacus’ (and Kierkegaard’s) terms, there is no *necessary* reason why Jesus should be regarded as the *only* allowable historical point of departure for the infinite passion of inwardness. In principle, Kierkegaard’s position leaves itself open to an affirmation of multiple such points of departure, even if he himself does not explore this possibility. Signs of contradiction that birth the infinite passion of faith are in principle endlessly multiple. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, *every single individual* is to become a sign of contradiction in her or his own lived existence.

⁵⁴ Including secular orthodoxies of non-belief, or apocalyptic orthodoxies or radical belief, or liberal orthodoxies of rational belief, or materialist orthodoxies of pure immanence, etc. Faith opens any and every position to a trembling that cannot be controlled.

transgresses the boundaries that bring it to articulation. Kierkegaard everywhere works to release this passion rather than to contain it.⁵⁵

Before continuing on with my direct exposition of Kierkegaard, I would like to turn to the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, specifically an essay of his on faith. Nancy is exemplary among contemporary thinkers in giving voice to the passion of faith that exceeds any conceptual delimitation. In the essay to which I am turning, he explicitly articulates this passion as an excess of action. What Nancy offers is a way of powerfully articulating the apophatic energy of faith that resonates significantly with the energy I want to unearth and release from Kierkegaard's texts.

Further, having read Kierkegaard backward into conversation with medieval mystics (Porete and Eckhart), I also want to show that he can be read forward into conversation with thinkers of deconstruction. This is one of the untapped powers of Kierkegaard: that he is a juncture and meeting point in which the energies and gestures of both traditional negative theology and deconstruction can mingle and feed off each other without antagonism or the anxious need to protect their respective intellectual turfs. More often than not representatives of traditional negative theology and deconstruction feel the need to protect themselves from each other. Such identity anxiety, however, is against the spirit and deepest possibilities of both negative theology and deconstruction. Kierkegaard, I want to claim, makes possible an opening beyond this anxiety and its antagonisms.

⁵⁵ It is no accident that so many of Kierkegaard's deepest readers move well beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. There is an energy, a passion, a restlessness in Kierkegaard's writing that is always launching itself beyond the bounds and limits through which it comes to articulation. For an account of this excess of energy and its dissemination, see Charles Scott, "The Force of Life and Faith: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche," unpublished paper, 2014.

Nancy's essay, "The Judeo-Christian (on Faith)," in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, is a reading of the book of James, which he reads as a deconstructive text within the New Testament. It is deconstructive not because it destructs some already formed content of belief but because it concerns itself with what occurs prior to the full formation of a determinate object of belief, such as the christological object of belief in Paul's letters. It concerns itself, in other words, with what occupies a certain gap or passage, the dash "-" of "Judeo-Christian," an unstable moment in the passage from Judaism to Christianity. The book of James stands "between two theological elaborations, and thus perhaps also between two religions, the Jewish and the Christian, like their hyphen and their separation, but also of their com-possibility, whatever the status of this 'com-' might be: like their construction and their deconstruction taken together."⁵⁶

The movement of faith in the book of James, on Nancy's reading, is not directed toward a stable object or accomplishment that would "cut faith off from all action"⁵⁷ and let it rest in an object or achievement, as in certain interpretations of Paul to which James is responding. Faith, rather, is nothing but a passage or movement, one that is doubled on itself, forming and maintaining itself as action or work. Faith is reduplicated upon itself as nothing but its work, its self-activation without object or objective. Nancy writes, "it is not the economy of a Christocentric salvation that organizes James' thought: it is, as it were, directly, a certain relation of [the human being] to holiness that becomes an image [of God]... The epistle is wholly given over... to the act of faith."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 48.

⁵⁷ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 48.

⁵⁸ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 47-8.

Nancy's exposition of this holiness resonates significantly with Kierkegaard's own exposition of the book of James that I unpacked in the last chapter, specifically with Kierkegaard's reflections of the good and the gift. It is this that I would like to home in on, how the gift of the good, the good as gift, as grace, is nothing but the activation of the self in excess of itself.

Reflecting on James' naming of God as the "Father lights" from whom comes every good and perfect gift, Nancy writes:

God is first the giver...He gives not so much some thing as the possibility of the clarity in which alone there can be things. If the logic of the gift is indeed, as the other James [Jacques Derrida] enjoys thinking, that the giver abandons him- or herself in his or her gift, then that is what is taking place here. In giving, in fulfilling the gift, God gives himself just as much as he remains in himself without shadows, since it is in this dissipation of the shadow, this clearing of light that he gives, and since he 'gives to all, simply' (James 1:5). To give and to withhold, to give oneself and to withhold oneself, these are not contradictories here, and correlatively, to be and to appear would be identical here: a phenomenology that is theological, but not theophanic.⁵⁹

"Father of lights," for Nancy, names an event of giving within which creation opens, specifically as an event of "clearing" in which things or beings are allowed to appear. God is this event of giving, purely, without shadow, withdrawn into an unapproachable light that lights all things. God is the sheer gratuity of the world that withdraws in order to let the world be, in grace. This perfectly parallels Kierkegaard's own reading of the name "Father of lights," which for him names the withdrawn gifting in which the self is gifted into itself as an absolute openness, into itself as a hospitality to the gratuity of existence.

Faith in the Father of lights, for Nancy, does not name a movement in which the human being apprehends this gifting as an object, or as the gift of any object, but a movement in which

⁵⁹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 49.

the human being becomes itself an image, or “trace” or “vestige,”⁶⁰ of the invisible gifting that is God. He writes:

This gift gives nothing that might be of the order of an appropriable good. (We must also remember...that this epistle is the most vehemently opposed to the rich in the entirety of the New Testament). This gift gives itself, it gives its own gift's favor, which is to say, a withdrawal into the grace of the giver and of the present itself... To be in the image of God is therefore to be asking for grace, to give oneself in turn to the gift. Far from coming out of an askesis, one may justifiably say that this logic of grace arises out of enjoyment, and this enjoyment itself comes out of an abandon. That supposes, no doubt, according to the letter of the text, ‘unhappiness’ and ‘bereavement,’ ‘weeping’ and ‘humiliation,’ but these are not a sacrifice: they are the disposition of abandon, in which joy is possible. To be sure, something is abandoned, and it is lack, along with the desire for appropriation. But that is not sacrificed: it is not offered and consecrated to God. James is not preaching renunciation here: he is laying bare a logic separated as much from envy as from renunciation. And this logic is that of what he calls faith.⁶¹

The parallels here with Kierkegaard here are striking, so much so that one begins to wonder whether Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses on James are operating in the background for Nancy. What is given in the gift is its withdrawal through which the self is opened as an asking or longing for the gift. Kierkegaard: “Then in a beautiful sense the human heart will gradually (the grace of God is never taken by force) become more and more discontented—that is, it will desire more and more ardently, will long more and more intensely, to be assured of grace.”⁶² This longing for the gift *is* the gift. It is in longing for the gift that the human being comes to image the gift (and its giver, who is nothing but his gift), to image it negatively or apophatically, becoming the trace of its withdrawal in the world, a withdrawal that keeps existence open with and through longing. And for Nancy (and Kierkegaard), to give oneself over to this longing is not to “sacrifice” existence but to abandon oneself into its openness, into its joy beyond any appropriable good or goodness. What propels and activates existence here is not desire driven by

⁶⁰ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 49.

⁶¹ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 50-1.

⁶² EUD, 303.

lack, which is what James identifies as the envy that leads to murder (4:2), but rather longing thrown open by the joy of a non-appropriable gift that never ceases to give itself.

Such a relation of the self to the gift and its giver (each always reduplicated as the other) is the *work* of faith, faith as work, faith as the activation of the self by and through and as the unfinishable setting-in-motion-without-possession of the gift. This is how Nancy reads James 2:18-9: “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” Faith is not belief. Faith is not the apprehension of any content. Faith is the activation of the self, its working from and in and with and toward the gift. Nancy’s commentary on this passage is as follows:

These works do not stand in the order of external manifestation, or in that of a demonstration through the phenomenon. And faith does not subsist in itself. This is why what is in question here is to show faith *ek ton ergon*, on the basis of works, and coming out of them. Instead of works proceeding from faith, and instead of works expressing it, faith here exists only in the works: in works that are its own and whose existence makes up the whole essence of faith, if we may put it that way. Verse 20 states that faith without works is *arge*, that is, vain, inefficient, and ineffective...*Argos* is a contraction of *aergos*, which is to say without *ergon*. James is thus stating a quasi-tautology. But it means: the *ergon* is here existence. That also means, then, that the *ergon* is understood in a general sense, as effectivity much more than as production; it is understood as being-in-act much more than as the *operari* of an *opus*.

This logic is so precise and so restrictive that it obligates us to set aside a certain comprehension of the *ergon* to which we are more habituated, and even our Platonic and Aristotelian understanding of *poiesis*—a word that appears in 1:25, tied to *ergon*, and which everything makes us think, following several translators, in the sense of “practice” (thus, of “*praxis*”), that is, if *praxis* is indeed action in the sense of *by* or *of* an agent and not the *praxis* exerted *upon* an object.⁶³

What Nancy is reading here out of the book of James is an approach to the work of faith, its self-activation, as non-teleological action. It is non-teleological because faith does not act upon any object nor does it work to produce any object, such as its own merit (which is perhaps the temptation of Aristotelian inflected Catholic readings). Faith works, simply. Faith *is* its own

⁶³ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 51.

work, an activation not directed toward any result. Again, this parallels perfectly Kierkegaard's approach to the subjectivity of faith that is propelled by a passion, a motion that has abandoned the need for results. Faith works only to keep the self in motion, apophatically beyond any objective position or achievement. Faith: abandoned to the gift, arriving at myself only as a departure, I cannot say what or where I am, only that I am in becoming, moving I know not where—this is my trembling, my sorrow, my joy.

Nancy goes on to translate this reading of work in the book of James into his own philosophical idiom. It is here where what I want to call an “apophasis of action” comes clearly into articulation:

One might say: *pistis* is the *praxis* that takes place in and as the *poiesis* of the *erga*. If I wanted to write this in a Blanchotian idiom, I would say that faith is the inactivity or inoperativity that takes place in and as the work. And if I wanted to pass from one James to the other [to Jacques Derrida], I would say that faith, as the *praxis* of *poiesis*, opens in *poiesis* the inadequation to self that alone can constitute “doing” and/or “acting” (both concepts implying the difference within or unto self of every concept or the irreducible difference between a *lexis* and the *praxis* that would seek to effectuate it). Extrapolating from there, I would say that *praxis* is that which could not be the production of a work adequate to its concept (and thus, production of an object), but that *praxis* is in every work and it is *ek tou ergou*, that which exceeds the concept of it. This is not, as we commonly think, that which is lacking in the concept, but rather that which, in exceeding it, thrusts the concept out of itself and gives it more to conceive, or more to grasp and think, more to touch and to indicate, than that which it itself conceives. Faith would thus be here the *praxical* excess of and in action or in operation, and this excess insofar as it aligns itself with nothing other than itself, that is to say, also with the possibility for a “subject” (for an agent or actor) to be more, to be infinitely more and excessively more than what it is in itself and for itself.⁶⁴

The lines I want to highlight here are, “the inadequation to self that alone can constitute “doing” and/or “acting,” as well as the last sentence: “Faith would thus be here the *praxical* excess of and in action or in operation, and this excess insofar as it aligns itself with nothing other than itself, that is to say, also with the possibility for a “subject” (for an agent or actor) to be more, to be

⁶⁴ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 52.

infinitely more and excessively more than what it is in itself and for itself.” This is exactly the logic of Kierkegaardian repetition and reduplication. For the self to repeat or reduplicate itself is to open within itself, to let into itself, an absolute incommensurability or distance that becomes the inadequation of the self to itself, its releasement beyond, or the annihilation of, self-identity. This inadequation of the self to itself is the opening of the self as an unfinishable operation given over to its own excess. It is that which forms subjectivity as *passion*, tensed and stretched across an infinite distance beyond all resolution.

Nancy describes this passion, again with perfect Kierkegaardian logic, as “the being-*unto-the-other* of its being-*unto-self*.”⁶⁵ The gap or between or passage that is the relation of the self to itself, its inwardness, is, in the instant of faith, thrown open by an absolute otherness, a distancing, a spacing, a gifting, a joying that keeps the self in unending motion, in action. This is, for Kierkegaard, what it means to exist “before God”: “To become nothing before God”—split open beyond identity—“and nevertheless infinitely, unconditionally engaged.”⁶⁶ Faith: “to come so close to oneself in one’s understanding, in one’s knowing”—knowing only the inadequation of the self to itself that is its being-*unto-God*—“that all one’s understanding becomes action.”⁶⁷

Nancy continues:

In this sense, faith cannot be an adherence to some contents of belief. If belief must be understood as a weak form or analogy of knowledge, then faith is not of the order of belief. It comes neither from a knowledge nor from a wisdom, not even by analogy. And it is also in this sense that we should understand Paul’s opposition of Christian “madness” to the “wisdom” of the world: this “madness” is neither a super-wisdom nor something symmetrical to wisdom or to knowledge. What James, for his part, would have us understand is that faith is its own work. It *is* in works, it *makes* them, and the works *make* it. Taking a step further, even a short step, we could extrapolate from James a declaration like the following: “It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a ‘belief,’ for example, in the belief in redemption by the Christ, that which characterizes the Christian; only

⁶⁵ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 54.

⁶⁶ JFY, 106.

⁶⁷ JFY, 115.

Christian *practice* is Christian, a life like that *lived* by him who died on the cross”—a declaration that we could read in Nietzsche.⁶⁸

And of course in Kierkegaard! Kierkegaard, after all, titled the book where he elaborates most fully a Christian point of view *Practice In Christianity*. Christianity is nothing but its lived enactment, its enactment to excess “with the silent and various eloquence of action,”⁶⁹ beyond any reduction to belief.

Going on to offer a reading of James’ reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, reading it as a story of the work of faith beyond belief, Nancy writes:

Contrary to Paul (Romans 4), James maintains that Abraham is justified by his work, designated as the offering of Isaac...According to Paul, what is important is that Abraham *believed* that God could give him a son, against all natural evidence. His act thus depended on a knowledge postulate...For James, on the contrary, Abraham did. He offered up Isaac. It is not said there that he judged, considered, or believed...In a certain sense, James’s Abraham believes nothing, does not even hope (Paul says that he ‘hoped without hope’: even this dialectic is absent in James). James’s Abraham is not in the economy of assurances or substitutes for assurance. Abraham is neither persuaded nor convinced: his assent is not in the *logismos*. It is only in the *ergon*. If the notion of “faith” must be situated in the “logical” or “logistical” order...then this faith resides in the inadequation of one’s own “*logos*” to itself...Faith resides in inadequation to itself as a content of meaning. And it is in this precisely that it is truth qua truth of faith or faith as truth and verification. This is not sacri-fication but veri-fication...Faith, according to James, is effected entirely in the inadequation of its enactment to any concept of that act even if it be a concept formed by analogy, by symbols, or by an “as if.” The work of Abraham is the acting or the doing of this inadequation: a *praxis* whose *poiesis* is the incommensurability of an action (to offer up Isaac up) and its representation or its meaning (to immolate his son).⁷⁰

This might as well be a commentary on *Fear and Trembling*. “I cannot think myself into Abraham,”⁷¹ writes Johannes de Silentio. “By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether.”⁷²

Silentio cannot form any concept of Abraham’s act, cannot translate it into any framework of

⁶⁸ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 52.

⁶⁹ PC, 14.

⁷⁰ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 53-4.

⁷¹ FTR, 33.

⁷² FTR, 59.

meaning. Abraham's faith remains apophatically mute—"Abraham *cannot* speak."⁷³ His faith speaks only in the silence of its action. "He speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues."⁷⁴ Silentio's Abraham opens up an absolute incommensurability between action and meaning, between the *logos* of belief and the *ergon* of faith.

Faith, in *Fear and Trembling*, is nothing other than the enactment of this inadequation, which is articulated as the inadequation between the ethical and the movement of faith. The ethical *meaning* of Abraham's act can only be murder. If one could assign that meaning to Abraham's action, then he could be placed within the ethical, albeit negatively. Or if one were to supply his action with religious meaning, in order to rescue it from its ethical meaning, it would be sacrifice, a consecration of Isaac to God. Faith, however, transcends or transgresses the order of meaning altogether. It has no *logos*, only its *ergon*. As Nancy puts it, "faith resides in inadequation to itself as a content of meaning." This is why Silentio, who is continually reduced to silence even though he "strains every muscle to get a perspective,"⁷⁵ can only call Abraham's act "absurd" and "mad." He is bewildered and undone by Abraham: "I am shattered... I become paralyzed."⁷⁶ Abraham's act is without articulable meaning. It is even without articulable unmeaning. It is *neither* murder *nor* sacrifice. It is action, as Nancy puts it, as "an exposition to what cannot be appropriated, to what has outside itself, and infinitely outside itself, the justice and truth of itself."⁷⁷

One could say that the inadequation of the ethical and the religious here is nothing other than the enacted inadequation of the ethical to itself. Faith, in *Fear and Trembling*, does not

⁷³ FTR, 115.

⁷⁴ FTR, 114.

⁷⁵ FTR, 33.

⁷⁶ FTR, 33.

⁷⁷ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 55.

abide simply outside the ethical in a self-contained religious sphere. Faith, rather, is the opening of an outside *within* the ethical itself, opening the ethical to its own inadequation to itself. Absent of faith, the ethical is “the universal,” the totality of relations that “rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere,”⁷⁸ perfectly adequate to itself, self-identical. Faith is the trembling of this self-contained sphere that exposes it to an outside, disrupting its immanent continuity and identity with itself.

This is not, however, simply a destruction of the ethical. It is a repetition of the ethical, its disjuncting from itself that opens within itself the gap and passage of faith, which traverses the ethical with apophatic action, leaving the trace of a non-appropriable gift. This is why I have said previously that Abraham’s exit from the ethical is *nothing but* his re-entrance into it otherwise, its repetition off itself. Silentio writes:

From this it does not follow that the ethical should be abolished; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.⁷⁹

The hidden message of *Fear and Trembling*, what “the son understood but the messenger did not,”⁸⁰ is that faith, by passing to the other only by passing apophatically through the blinding but absolutely non-hostile darkness of God, is the opening within the ethical of a non-acquisitive *love* born of grace, a love that embraces the neighbor as a non-appropriable gift. This is a love infinitely, qualitatively different than a love that would keep the neighbor, even if it is a child, or a lover, as one’s own. This is a love that could never have or arrive at anything, again, not even its own virtue. It could never take stock of and calculate its responsibilities in order to assure itself of its own goodness, or determine when it has loved enough, or when it can be satisfied and

⁷⁸ FTR, 68.

⁷⁹ FTR, 70.

⁸⁰ FTR, 3. This is from the quote by Hamman that is the epigraph to *Fear and Trembling*.

proud of its results. Faith lets the incommensurability of the eternal into the commensurability of the ethical and in doing so lets every calculable goal undergo an annihilating emptying into a dark night. Faith keeps the ethical infinitely tensed and in motion, trembling with passion and risk, given over to a work, an action never commensurate with any concept of it, never identical with any result, telos, or merit, abandoned absolutely to the gift of the other beyond possession.

It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it—but this knight [of faith] does it. Most people live completely absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows; they are benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance. The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. It is more or less conspicuous according to their skill, but even the most skillful of these knights cannot hide this wavering. One does not need to see them in the air; one needs only to see the instant they touch and have touched the earth—and then one recognizes them. But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that knight [of faith] can do it, and this is the one and only marvel.⁸¹

v

I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to christology. Rather than provide anything like a thorough reading of Kierkegaard's christology (which always withdraws itself from any kind of fully developed christology anyhow), I simply want to sketch the possibility of an apophatic reading, a sketch I have already begun.

I want once again to let Nancy's reading of the book of James lead the way. In the same essay I have been quoting, he offers a reading of the name "Jesus-Christ" that occupies its dash "-", the deconstructive or apophatic gap in which "the proper name does not turn into a

⁸¹ FTR, 41.

concept”⁸² around which one could organize a system of belief. This gap is the opening or emptying of the name of Jesus into an action or work, one that “purely and simply gives itself, and precisely as that which is not appropriable.”⁸³ That Jesus is nothing but a giving without concept means, for Nancy, that “there would no longer be any messianism here, but charisma, an inappropriable gift.”⁸⁴ Commentating on James 2:1 that reads, “my brothers, you who have faith in our Lord Jesus the Christ of glory,” Nancy writes:

Faith in glory or faith of glory is faith in the inappropriable: and once again, as the inadequation of the work or the inadequation at work. This faith receives itself from inappropriable glory, it is in glory in the sense that it comes from glory, where that glory provides faith its assurance, which is not a belief. The *doxa* of Jesus is his appearing: the fact that he is come, that the glory of his reign has appeared, already given as faith. *Jesus* is thus the name of this appearing—and he is this *doxa* qua name: the proper name of the inappropriable (that is, as we know, the very property of the name or, if you prefer, its divinity). And it is thus a name for any name, for all names, for the name of every other.⁸⁵

What is at work in the name of Jesus, what Jesus names, is the work by which every other is named, and named as other. Jesus is the name that mingles with every other name, touches every other name and in touching names every other, to excess. The name of Jesus is emptied out into every other name as the glory of every name, its divinity, its unspeakability. One would privilege the name of Jesus not in order to maintain an object of belief but only in order to return to and repeat ever again this emptying. In Jesus, every other, every name, is de-nominated. The name of Jesus puts itself under erasure, under the sign of the cross, in order to name the excess of every other. This is its glory, the silent eloquence of its action.

⁸² Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 56.

⁸³ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 57.

⁸⁴ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 57.

⁸⁵ Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 57.

This is very close to the logic of “abasement” in Kierkegaard’s *Practice in Christianity*. Anti-Climacus does, to be sure, sharply distinguish “abasement” from “glory,” insisting that Jesus is met only as the abased one:

One cannot become a believer except by coming to him in his state of abasement...He does not exist in any other way, for only in this was he existed...What he has said and taught, every word he has spoken, becomes *eo ipso* untrue if we make it appear as if it is Christ in glory who says it. No, *he* is silent; the *abased one* is speaking.⁸⁶

This sharp distinction from glory, however, which repeats Luther’s opposition between a “theology of the cross” and a “theology of glory,” is simply a way of indicating that Jesus is only ever encountered through the *work* of his abasement, his kenotic self-emptying, rather than in his elevation into an accomplished object of belief. “Glory,” for Anti-Climacus, is the name of an accomplishment; “abasement” is the name of an ongoing apophatic action. If one were to reclaim “glory” within a Kierkegaardian idiom, faith could be the glory of abasement, its silent self-communication in action.

Anti-Climacus writes movingly about this abasement in the opening to *Practice in Christianity*, which, to my mind, is one of the most tenderly apophatic, or apophatically tender passages in all of the authorship. Commenting on Jesus’ “releasing words”⁸⁷ in the gospels, “Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest,” Anti-Climacus writes, “he does only one thing: he opens his arms.”⁸⁸ Jesus is *nothing but* an opening to others. “Ah, where there is heart-room, there is indeed always room, but where was there heart-room if not in his heart!”⁸⁹ Jesus is nothing but an unconditional hospitality. He is nothing but an infinite roominess held open to the frailty and suffering of the world. His “inner being is like an infinite

⁸⁶ PC, 24.

⁸⁷ PC, 21.

⁸⁸ PC, 19.

⁸⁹ PC, 14.

abyss of sadness.”⁹⁰ Jesus sets absolutely no conditions on his love. “He makes no condition whatsoever.”⁹¹ Jesus is an opening that effaces itself of any identity, of any distinction or limitation that would exclude anyone. Jesus “abandons himself”⁹² in hospitality:

These words, which seem to have been designed for him from the beginning of the world, he does in fact say: Come here, all you. O human self-sacrifice, even when you are most beautiful and noble, when we admire you the most, there is still one more sacrifice—to sacrifice every qualification of one’s own self so that in one’s willingness to help there is not the slightest partiality. O love—thus to set no stipulation whatever of price upon oneself, completely to forget oneself, so that one is someone who helps, completely blind to who it is that one is helping, seeing with infinite clarity that, whoever that person may be, he is a sufferer—to be unconditionally willing to help all in this way, alas, therein different from everyone!⁹³

To be different by way of one’s indifference to the objective differences that separate one sufferer from another is to be *absolutely* different, infinitely, qualitatively different, different with a difference that cannot announce its difference or form itself into an identity around which a border could be drawn. This is a difference that gapes open as an unconditional love that longs, without any concept, for each and every one. “This invitation blasts away all distinctions in order to gather everybody together.”⁹⁴ Yet this invitation does not gather everybody into a crowd, into a religious herd. It calls out to each single individual in her or his singularity. “He who opens his arms and invites all...wants to help all—his method of treating the patient is just as if intended for each one individually, as if in each patient he had only this one patient.”⁹⁵ To encounter what is at work in the name of Jesus is to hear nothing but the absolute, singularizing declaration: *that I love only you.*⁹⁶

⁹⁰ PC, 77.

⁹¹ PC, 13.

⁹² PC, 13.

⁹³ PC, 13.

⁹⁴ PC, 17.

⁹⁵ PC, 15.

⁹⁶ I have borrowed this phrase from Jason Wirth’s wonderful essay, “Empty Community: Kierkegaard On Being With You,” in *The New Kierkegaard*, 221.

To let oneself be loved absolutely in one's singularity, to be embraced by Jesus' apophatic arms that will never enclose one into an identity, to receive from such unconditioned hospitality a name that cannot be named, a name above all naming, is the most profound form of self-denial, profound because it coincides with an absolute self-affirmation. Such self-emptying into the infinite abyss of Jesus' abasement, at the heart of which is a denial that any crowd or objective identity could tell me who I am, is neither the self-abnegation that thrives on self-accusation and shame nor the heroics of an askesis that longs for its own virtue—both of which Nietzsche rightly derided. It is an affirmation undergone in secrecy and silence, an affirmation perhaps more profound than any Nietzsche knew. To let oneself be denied the identity and recognition of the crowd in favor of being loved as absolutely nothing, nothing but the singular, unnamable instant of one's existence, is a denial of any and all relative value, which is always the condition of identity and the objectification of one against another: rich against poor, male against female, free against slave, citizen against foreigner, saint against sinner, Christian against Jew, Christian against Muslim, etc. In the name of Jesus, there is only ever the *absolute* value of "that one" [*hiin Einzelte*], of each one, of every one, which is always the annihilation of the *relative* value of bordered identity, of "mine" or "yours" or "ours."

This is, perhaps, the transvaluation of all value, a way of valuing otherwise than through the representational logic of money, a logic that has driven Western civilization into nihilism and despair. The love of God, for Kierkegaard, "is infinitely unrelated to money,"⁹⁷ that is, to any relativizing or calculating schema of valuation that always prefers the ninety-nine sheep, the crowd and its capital, to the feeble one with no appropriable good who has wandered away. Living out the singularizing love of God in its infinite unrelatedness to money and the

⁹⁷ WL, 319.

calculation of returns undergirded by perverse incentives is perhaps the most exigent vocation of faith as the sun goes down on Western civilization. As Nancy writes, “the absolute must be affirmed without its relative counterpart, the absolute of each ‘one,’ of each ‘here and now,’ of each instant of eternity. This is how a different evaluation could be opened up: in the fact that there is no value besides what has absolute value.”⁹⁸ The love at work in the name of Jesus is precisely this: that there is only ever the absolute value of this instant in which I am to love “that one.” This is a love that apophatically exceeds all naming and appropriation. It is alive only in the silent and voracious eloquence of action.

⁹⁸ Nancy, *Adoration*, 74.

CHAPTER V

HOPE: KEEPING TIME ABSURDLY OPEN

Life is one nightwatch of expectancy. –Kierkegaard¹

That hope whose form is madness. –Kierkegaard²

i

Fear and Trembling concludes by leaving its reader with what is perhaps an unexpected image given the harrowing image of Abraham on his way to slay Isaac around which the book is organized. The book concludes with a rather more innocent scene, that of children at play on holiday. Silentio writes:

When children on holiday have already played all the games before twelve o'clock and impatiently ask: Can't somebody think up a new game—does this show that these children are more developed and more advanced than the children in the contemporary or previous generation who make the well-known games last all day long? Or does it show instead that the first children lack what I would call the endearing earnestness belonging to play?³

What we are given at the end of *Fear and Trembling* is a parable of beginning. Children who have become bored with their games before twelve o'clock are children who have become bored with the morning, the beginning of the day. The morning of a holiday, like childhood itself, stands as an excessively open and undetermined beginning. It is holy, absolved from the projects and calculations that structure ordinary days. Yet the children in Silentio's parable cannot abide this indeterminate opening. They cannot sink into the beginnings that they are. They can only approach themselves and their games as projects that act as defenses against this opening by

¹ EUD, 206.

² FTR, 16-7.

³ FTR, 122.

becoming diversions from it, as is the case with A's rotation project in "Rotation of the Crops." The opening, however, cannot be closed. One cannot will the closure of the day. Time keeps coming, excessively. Eternity will always hold the day open. In relation to the eternal it is always morning, the day is only ever just beginning, time remains "young and beautiful,"⁴ and "no one goes further"⁵ than beginning. And so the children's games-turned-projects inevitably founder and exhaust themselves before this infinite opening. The supposedly "advanced" and "developed" children (Kierkegaard is alluding here to his modern, bourgeois, liberal age) will spend the day anxiously trying to discover new projects that will move them past or distract them from this excessive, indeterminate beginning. They will search with an anxiety fuelled by despair. Unable to let go of the need to determine the day, they lack "the endearing earnestness belonging to play." They lack the patience that belongs to play, the patience that sinks into the morning, the beginning, with no need to get anywhere.

Other children, however, children of the holy-day, the day unhinged from any calculative economy, are capable of making well-known games last all day long. They have no need to advance beyond the beginning, or beyond simple games, such as "love."⁶ They have learned to repeat the beginning the whole day long, to stay with the morning and sink into its excess, its holiness. Such repetition is "the highest passion."⁷ These children do not anxiously project themselves into time in order to secure the future against its open-endedness. Absorbed in the present, abandoned to the gift of the moment, the instant of beginning, they play themselves into the future, having let go of what it will be.

⁴ FTR, 121.

⁵ FTR, 122.

⁶ FTR, 121.

⁷ FTR, 122.

My claim in this chapter is that hope, for Kierkegaard, is an attunement to temporality and temporalization that keeps time by keeping it open, absurdly open, apophatically open, by virtue of the eternal. Hope, rather than anticipating some determinate end or outcome, is a movement that abides in an infinitely reduplicating beginning, a beginning that lets go of teleology and the need to posit the movement of time as a determinate totality with an ideal meaning. Eternity is not the ideal, universal meaning of time. In the instant of its synthesis with time—*Øieblikket*—eternity is the source and power of temporalization as a *singularizing* power, a power that opens the movement of temporalization as a living event undertaken and undergone intimately and secretly. Eternity is the gift of one's own intimate line of flight.

To hope, therefore, is not to project an ideal future for the crowd, the polis, or the ecclesia. It is to become the singular and infinite beginning that one is right here, right now, with apophatic motion and contingency, split open on the most intimate levels of lived existence by and toward the silent gift of one's becoming. To hope is to affirm and love one's own temporalization absolutely, even amidst suffering, even though temporalization *is* suffering. Such self-love is not solipsism but a breaking open, an opening that hopes for itself only as it hopes also for "the neighbor," for "that one," for her or his own intimate line of flight. To hope is to make room by virtue of the eternal for the other-ing of time, for time not projected or calculated but as the space in which what is other is allowed to come, in time. This is to make time within oneself for *love*, to make love with time with a passion, a patience, that holds the present open with possibility, birth, and beginning—even when everything would speak of one's right to sink into closure and despair. To hope is simply to love existence madly, without why, to love one's own time as a time of possibility, a time intersected and re-launched by the time of the other, the timing of eternity.

In the discourse in *Works of Love* titled, “Love Hopes All Things—And Yet Is Never Put to Shame,” Kierkegaard writes:

Lovingly to hope all things signifies the relationship of the loving one to other people, so in relation to them, hoping for them, he continually holds possibility open with an infinite partiality for the possibility of the good. That is, he lovingly hopes that at every moment there is possibility, the possibility of the good for the other person.⁸

To hope is to hold the present open with possibility, not the possibility of this or that, which could always come to shame, but possibility as such, possibility as the good. “The good” is not a determine goal or outcome but the very relation of possibility to itself (its reduplication) within which actuality comes to birth, within which actuality is *nothing but* the instant of its birth and beginning, its releasement into existence without determinate teleology. To hope is to long, for oneself and for the other, that actuality would never cease to come to birth apophatically, that existence would never cease to be an ex-it from closure, an ecstasy—the movement, motion, and emotion of abandon in which joy is possible, even amidst pain. Hope is thus an “infinite task” to be undertaken and undergone “as a little child,” as one who knows nothing but the miracle and madness of beginnings.

In what follows, I will turn to a few of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses to develop this apophatic approach to hope. It is above all in his discourses on *patience* that Kierkegaard develops an apophatic attunement to temporality. What I want to draw from these discourses is the way in which they regard patience, paradoxically, as a certain kind of fulfillment. It is through patience that one enters the “fullness of time,” a relation to temporality as a whole. The wholeness or fullness entered through patience, however, is not any kind of determinate totality. It is not any *completion* that patience apprehends or anticipates but rather time as a reduplicating *beginning*, an opening. Patience “fills” time not with any determinate content but with its own

⁸ WL, 253.

openness, or it lets time be the openness that it is. “Let it bring what it will and must bring.”⁹ Time is fulfilled not through its completion or closure that would allow it to arrive at its ideal meaning. It is fulfilled, paradoxically, in the instant of its beginning. Time as a whole takes the “form” of an infinite beginning. This is an “overturning of thought and speech”¹⁰ that is “madness.”

An attunement to temporality as an infinite beginning is what Kierkegaard calls “the expectancy of faith.”¹¹ In an upbuilding discourse that goes by this title, he develops the category of “expectancy” by distinguishing it from what might be called “anticipation.” If anticipation relates to the future through the projective power of consciousness, filling the future with determinate content, expectancy holds itself open before the future as absolute, the future withdrawn or absolved from any determinate apprehension. What faith expects is simply time as openness, time as beginning. This is to expect “an eternity”¹² and “victory.”¹³ But again, the eternity and the victory here are nothing determinate. “The person who expects something particular or who bases his expectancy on something particular,” Kierkegaard writes, “does not have faith.”¹⁴ It is the very openness of faith that simply *is* the victory and the eternity. “The expectancy of faith...is victory.”¹⁵ “Expectancy is victory.”¹⁶ Faith as expectancy wins an eternal victory over time as structured by anticipation. By virtue of the eternal, faith enters into a released attunement to time, an apophatic attunement, and this is its victory, its liberation of the present that fills it with possibility, with hope.

⁹ EUD, 28.

¹⁰ EUD, 162.

¹¹ EUD, 8ff.

¹² EUD, 27.

¹³ EUD, 26.

¹⁴ EUD, 27.

¹⁵ EUD, 26.

¹⁶ EUD, 27.

Before turning directly to the discourses on patience, I want to raise a question that harkens back to what I have said about form and content in Kierkegaard's writing: why must thinking a proper—an apophatic—attunement to temporality take the form of an upbuilding discourse rather than, say, a scientific philosophical treatise? The reason is that the communication of patience must itself take the form and mood of patience. The author who would seek to attune the reader to expectancy must write patiently and not “tempt” the reader “to impatience in listening.”¹⁷ This involves writing with what Heidegger would come to call *Verhaltenheit*, “restraint.” What must be restrained, on Kierkegaard's terms, is the projective drive of consciousness, its desire to possess itself by positing time (or being or existence) as a determinate totality. Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses enact restraint and patience in multiple ways but perhaps most structurally by writing for and toward what slips away from any determinate totality, namely, *hiin Enkelte*. To write for “that one” requires patience and unknowing, a restraint that lets what is singular be in order to let it become, that opens the space of silent edification. It could be that ontology and metaphysics, at least certain kinds of ontology and metaphysics and styles of performing them, are essentially *impatient*, determined by an anxiety that cannot abide an apophatic beginning. To be sure, one could also be impatient in one's *opposition* to ontology and metaphysics, knowing too much about what comes after (or before) them. At his best, Kierkegaard resists both kinds of impatience, patiently holding open a space of edification that is not anxious about getting anywhere too quickly.

It is not only the upbuilding discourse, however, that enacts patience through its style and form. In 1844, the year Kierkegaard published two of his three discourses on patience, he also

¹⁷ EUD, 175.

published *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Prefaces*. The later three texts, written by Johannes Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, and Nicolaus Notebene respectively, are also texts of patience, if not explicitly in theme then certainly in style and mood of performance. *Prefaces* performs patience by repeating the form of the preface, the beginning prior to beginning, throughout the whole book, indeed *as* the book. Nicolaus enacts a released relation to the book. Likewise, Vigilius, in the preface to *The Concept of Anxiety*, informs his reader that he has published his text “carefree and at ease and without any sense of self-importance, as if he had brought everything to a conclusion or as if all the generations of the earth were to be blessed by his book.”¹⁸ Vigilius does not seek to “embrace the whole contemporary age with his paternal solicitude or assume that era and epoch begin with his book.”¹⁹ He does not hold out his book like “the New Year’s torch of his promise or with the intimations of his farseeing promises or with the referral of his reassurance to a currency of doubtful value.”²⁰ He writes, “I frankly confess that as an author I am a king without a country and also, in fear and trembling, an author without any claims.”²¹ Vigilius wishes to be regarded as “a layman who indeed speculates but is still far removed from speculation.”²² He does not insist that anyone read his book, sending greetings and a “well meant farewell” to “everyone who reads the book and also everyone who has had enough in reading the Preface.”²³ And this farewell was indeed well meant: we never hear from Vigilius again in the authorship.

Climacus establishes a similar mood in the preface to *Philosophical Fragments*. He writes:

¹⁸ CA, 7.

¹⁹ CA, 7.

²⁰ CA, 7.

²¹ CA, 8.

²² CA, 8.

²³ CA, 8.

What is offered here is only a pamphlet, *proprio Marte, propriis auspiciis, proprio stipendio* [by one's own hand, on one's own behalf, at one's own expense], without any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly endeavor in which one acquires legitimacy as a thoroughfare or transition, as concluding, introducing, or participating, as a co-worker or as a volunteer attendant, as a hero or at any rate as a relative hero, or at least as an absolute trumpeter.²⁴

Rather than a scientific scholar, Climacus is a “writer of half-hour pieces” that eschew “world-historical importance.”²⁵ He is “a loafer” who compares himself to the ancient Diogenes who in the midst of a siege of Corinth, “belted up his cloak and eagerly trundled his tub up and down the streets”²⁶ just to have something to do. Such authorial loafing is a disengagement from the “howling madness” of Climacus’ age “symptomized by yelling, convulsive yelling, while the sum and substance of the yelling are these words: era, epoch, era and epoch, epoch and era, the system.”²⁷ Climacus prays: “Heaven preserve me and my pamphlet from the meddling of such an uproarious, bustling oaf, lest he tear me out of my carefree contentedness as the author of a pamphlet.”²⁸ Rather than a convulsive, anxious, scholarly oaf, Climacus wants to be a dancer: “I have trained myself and am training myself always to be able to dance lightly in the service of thought.”²⁹ And a lover: “the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without passion: a poor model.”³⁰

Vigilius’ and Climacus’ mocking detachment from official scholardom is, I want to claim, a kind of patience, even if it is also an impatience with the madness of the present age. Their patience is not the kind of patience it takes to write the system, but the kind of patience that thinks and writes non-teleologically and non-acquisitively, that holds the time of writing *open*

²⁴ PF, 5.

²⁵ PF, 5.

²⁶ PF, 6.

²⁷ PF, 6.

²⁸ PF, 6-7.

²⁹ PF, 7.

³⁰ PF, 37.

with a passion irreducible to speculative reinscription. This is a kind of thinking that does not *use* patience to achieve an end, but *is* patience, patience before what it cannot acquire, control, or enforce. It is the kind of patience communicated “directly” in the upbuilding discourses of 1843 and 1844, to which I turn.

ii

Kierkegaard’s discourse “To Gain One’s Soul in Patience” is a commentary on Luke 21:19: “In your patience you will gain your souls.” The discourse, at heart, is a discourse on the soul, on the paradox that the soul must be *gained*. A paradox presents itself here because it would appear that “soul” names what the self simply *is* in its distinction from temporal change and becoming. The soul is what the self “possesses,” its home and presence to itself that abides amidst every change. The soul is the *a priori* condition of selfhood in time, one could say, its singularity and difference that does not allow it to be “lost” amidst the infinite flux of time, absorbed into “the infinite heartbeat of the sea.”³¹ One can, of course, “lose” one’s soul by attempting to gain “the world,” that is, by living only for a temporality closed in on itself, for what does not abide in difference but only for what passes into empty sameness. Attempting to gain the world would be a denial of one’s singularity, a singularity that must be lived as an ever increasing *difference* from and within the world: “If a person wants to gain his soul, he must let this resistance [to the world] become more and more pronounced and in so doing gain his soul, for his soul was this very difference: it was the infinity in the life of the world in its difference from itself.”³²

But what does it mean to *gain* one’s soul, to gain precisely what, as eternal, must be distinguished from gaining, from the logic of and movement of “the world.” That is the paradox. It is a paradox because Kierkegaard takes with full seriousness that the soul must *come into*

³¹ EUD, 164.

³² EUD, 165.

existence *in time*. That is, it must be gained on the plane of temporal becoming. The soul does not preexist temporality, nor does one gain it by fleeing temporality. If such was the case, then “recollection” would be the path to the soul, which would not in a strict sense be a *gaining* of one’s soul, its birth, but a return to one’s soul, a soul that would be eternal through its *opposition* to temporality. Kierkegaard does not oppose the soul to temporality. He wants to think the soul as a certain kind of infinite difference or opening *within* temporality—“the infinity in the life of the world in its difference from itself.” The eternal soul takes temporal form, the form of a temporal attunement that detaches or differs itself within temporality not in order to flee it, but in order to abide with it and in it as difference, differently, with faith and hope rather than despair.

But again, the paradox: to gain what is eternal precisely in and through time. To gain what in some sense cannot be gained. To possess what must be gained. Kierkegaard states the paradox with the following:

But if a person possesses his soul, he certainly does not need to gain it, and if he does not possess it, how then can he gain it, since the soul itself is the ultimate condition that is presupposed in every acquiring, consequently also in gaining the soul. Could there be a possession of that sort, which signifies precisely the condition for being able to gain the same possession?³³

And further:

What is there to live for if a person has to spend his whole life gaining the presupposition that on the deepest level is life’s presupposition—yes, what does that mean?³⁴

It means, precisely, that life or existence is not structured teleologically, that is, toward a determinate end-goal, toward the gaining of a coherent, narratable identity. Life or existence is ordered toward its own presupposition, that is, toward its own infinite beginning that will always interrupt the installation and articulation of identity. In a certain sense, there is nothing to live

³³ EUD, 163.

³⁴ EUD, 161.

for. Or what there is to live for is what escapes every “for,” what withdraws from conscription into any project of self-mastery. Life is without why, reduplicated upon its own presupposition, infinitely withdrawing from determinate ends and goals out into an infinite opening. Kierkegaard acknowledges that such an “overturning of thought and speech” is “strange” and “alarming.”³⁵

He writes:

Is it not alarming to tread this path where...one almost never gains anything; not the attainment of the goal, not the laying down of the burden, not the rich harvest, not wealth, not a wonderful catch, not the happiness of a child, not people’s favor, has not benefited others but gains only himself, a reward so small that even the little infant that dies at birth apparently possesses the same thing.³⁶

To gain one’s soul in time, to allow what is eternal to come into existence in time, means gaining nothing, nothing but the instant of time’s beginning, its commencement, its birth—which is always its re-commencement, its re-birth, the gaping and gap-ing of time, the spacing and repetition that holds open difference.

Kierkegaard further expresses this paradox of gaining one’s soul by offering a definition of the soul: “The soul is the contradiction of the temporal and the eternal.”³⁷ The soul is not in contradiction to the temporal but is itself the very contradiction of the temporal and the eternal, which is the same thing as saying that “it is to be possessed and gained at the same time.”³⁸

Everything hinges on the meaning of “contradiction.” “Soul” here names the site of an unmediated coincidence of opposites, the happening together of the temporal and the eternal in which, as *The Concept of Anxiety* puts it, there is “no third factor” in which they are synthesized.

Referring to the synthesis of time and eternity—*Øieblikket*—Vigilius writes:

The latter synthesis has only two factors, the temporal and the eternal. Where is the third factor? And if there is no third factor, there really is no synthesis, for a synthesis that is a

³⁵ EUD, 162.

³⁶ EUD, 162.

³⁷ EUD, 163.

³⁸ EUD, 166.

contradiction cannot be completed as a synthesis without a third factor, because the fact that the synthesis is a contradiction asserts that it is not.³⁹

The soul is a synthesis that “cannot be completed.” It is a synthesis that “is not,” a synthesiz-*ing* that remains open-ended, structured by a gap, an opening, a nothing that it cannot close.

Specifically, this means that the eternal cannot be assimilated into time. It will not submit to mediation. But not because it remains simply “outside” of or “beyond” time. In its coming into existence in time, the eternal comes into existence as a “contradiction” within time, as an inassimilable difference within time’s relation to itself, as an incommensurable opening, a beyond and spacing that happens *right here*, intimately, one that splits the present open.

Another way to say this is that eternity cannot be reconciled with any representation or concept of time, with any *anticipation* of time’s totality, closure, or end. In relation to “representation” and “anticipation,” writes Vigilius, *Øieblikket* can only be thought as a “moment of destruction.”⁴⁰ The moment or instant is the withdrawal of the eternal from from the possibility of its representation, and this impossibility is “that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other.”⁴¹ The soul is not the site of the synthesis of opposites in the concept that drives toward absolute knowing. It is, rather, the site of an absolute *touching*, a caressing of opposites, a touching that opens and confirms an infinite distance, a distance traversed only in affect, in longing, in passion. This is why Kierkegaard describes the reconciliation of time and eternity as nothing representable and externalizable but as an intimate rendezvous: “Now we are separated; we do not see each other every day, but we meet secretly in the victorious moment of

³⁹ CA, 85.

⁴⁰ CA, 88n.

⁴¹ CA, 89.

faithful expectancy.”⁴² Eternity is found in time only in the secret moment of expectancy, only when time is allowed to gape open in the instant of its birth without concept or conclusion.

If the soul, then, is this “contradiction,” if it is structured by non-completion and as such is the site where time is released into an infinite beginning, how does one gain one’s soul? “In patience you will gain your souls.” It is in an attunement of non-completion that the soul is gained, namely, in *patience*. Kierkegaard stresses that it is “in” patience and not “through” or “by means of” patience that the soul is gained. Patience is not a “third element”⁴³ that stands between the lack of the soul and its being gained, as if the condition for gaining the soul, patience, and the soul itself were two different things. They are one and the same:

In this gain, the very condition is also the object and is independent of anything external. The condition, therefore, after it has served the gaining, remains as that which is gained; this is different from what happens when the merchant has sold his merchandise and the fisherman has caught his fish—they lay aside patience and also their tools so that they may enjoy what has been gained... The condition that made possible the gaining of the soul was precisely the possession of the soul.⁴⁴

Continuing: “In these words [‘It grows in patience’], the condition and the conditioned are again inseparable, and these words themselves suggest duplexity and unity. The person who grows in patience does indeed grow and develop. What is it that grows in him? It is patience.

Consequently, patience grows in him, and how does it grow? Through patience.”⁴⁵ This is the movement of infinite reduplication, a movement of subjectivity infinitely doubled on itself without any mediation through objectivity, now taking place in and as the soul. Kierkegaard names it exactly as such in this discourse. Gaining one’s soul in patience is a “reduplicating repetition” [*fordoblende Gjentaelse*],⁴⁶ the soul doubled on its instant of beginning and opening.

⁴² EUD, 26.

⁴³ EUD, 168.

⁴⁴ EUD, 168.

⁴⁵ EUD, 169.

⁴⁶ EUD, 169.

“It is all a repetition.”⁴⁷ Mystical union, one might say, happens here as the instant of patience. The soul is one with God as it sinks into patience.

Such sinking, however, is again not a disengagement from existence, a mystical flight from temporality. It is a movement and work of temporality. Gaining patience is a “quiet but unflagging activity.”⁴⁸ Not activity with a determinate goal, however, but an apophatic activity:

It is a question not of making a conquest, of hunting and seizing something, but of becoming more and more quiet, because that which is to be gained is there within a person, and the trouble is that one is outside oneself, because that which is to be gained is in the patience, is not concealed in it so that the person who patiently stripped off its leaves, so to speak, would finally find it deep inside but is in it so that it is patience itself in which the soul in patience inclosingly spins itself and thereby gains patience and itself.⁴⁹

“Inclosingly spins itself,” like a dancer in movement who moves non-linearly, breaking the present open to an excess to which it abandons itself. To sink into oneself, into one’s soul, is not to find some concealed inner core. It is to become the very movement of patience that moves and spins in the moment without any need to get anywhere or gain anything except its own patient movement. To gain one’s soul in patience, one might say, is *to become the nothing that one is*, the nothing that in the moment of its touch and caress by eternity becomes a nothin-ing, the repetition of an apophatic beginning. Such gaining of an apophatic soul is not, crucially, an exercise of power. “The soul can obtain nothing through power.”⁵⁰ It is, rather, an abandon, a giving up of power, a becoming weak, “weaker and weaker in regard to the life of the world,”⁵¹ the way one becomes weak through the caress of a lover. And yet this is the soul’s paradoxical strength, the gift of the soul’s singularity, its “being stronger than the world through its

⁴⁷ EUD, 170.

⁴⁸ EUD, 170.

⁴⁹ EUD, 170-1.

⁵⁰ EUD, 172.

⁵¹ EUD, 171.

weakness...in its inability to gain anything but itself unless it wants to be deceived, and in its being able to gain itself only by losing itself.”⁵²

“But what, then, is a human soul?” Kierkegaard imagines someone asking at the end of his discourse. He will not answer the question, though, detecting in it an “impatience” in which “one person hurries forward to explain to everyone what the soul is and [in which] a second person waits impatiently for him to explain it, [in which] the hearer impatiently expedites the speaker’s explanation and then in turn becomes impatient because he finds it inadequate.”⁵³ *Knowledge of the soul will not as such move one closer to becoming a soul.* “To know what a human soul is, what this means, is still a long way from beginning to gain one’s soul in patience, and it is a knowledge that exhibits its difference from that gaining inasmuch as it does indeed grow in impatience.”⁵⁴ The soil of knowledge is impatience, whereas the soil of the soul is patience, a patience that does not rush to *know* itself, or knows itself only as a patient un-knowing. “In knowledge patience is not simultaneously the condition and the conditioned.”⁵⁵ That is, knowledge is not a reduplication in itself. Knowledge is always a mediation that at best can *use* patience to gain what it wants but it cannot *be* the patience that gains only its own patience. “The person who wants to be patient only in order to know his soul will not gain his soul in patience.”⁵⁶

⁵² EUD, 172. The paradox of gaining one’s soul bears striking resemblances to Nietzsche’s dictum, “Become what you are.” Yet whereas Nietzsche’s thought is guided by the movements of “eternal return” and *amor fati* and “will to power,” Kierkegaard’s thought is guided by the movement of *Gelassenheit*. However much Nietzsche and Kierkegaard might each recognize himself in the other’s passion for a life timed by the repetition of eternity, such recognition would only be a sidelong glance at a fellow traveler moving in a very different direction. Nietzsche’s *uber-mensch* has its *élan*; Kierkegaard’s *Enkelte* has *nothing*. Both dance, but not to the same music.

⁵³ EUD, 172.

⁵⁴ EUD, 172.

⁵⁵ EUD, 174.

⁵⁶ EUD, 174.

Kierkegaard therefore concludes “To Gain One’s Soul in Patience” by submitting even his own discourse to an apophatic negation. “The description itself,” that is, the discourse the reader will have just read, is capable of being “taken away without taking away the patience and the gain that is in patience.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the discourse must submit to its own negation lest it “tempt” its reader to “impatience.”⁵⁸

iii

Kierkegaard’s third discourse on patience, “Patience In Expectancy,” turns its attention to an exemplary patient soul, namely, Anna, who makes her brief appearance in the biblical narrative in Luke 2:36-38:

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

As is typical of Kierkegaard’s treatment of biblical and other literary figures, he engages in an elaborate imaginative reconstruction in order to stage the performance of a particular modality of subjectivity. In Anna’s case, it is the coincidence of patience and expectancy that he has her perform. Before turning directly to this reconstruction, however, I want to note here again the issue of form in Kierkegaard’s writing. The discourses of 1843-4 that treat expectancy and patience unfold as dialectical movement, one in which time and eternity are simultaneously distinguished and allowed to coincide. “The Expectancy of Faith,” one could say, corresponds to the temporal side of the dialectic while “To Gain One’s Soul in Patience” corresponds to the eternal side. “Patience in Expectancy” performs their synthesis. This is, of course, the movement of Hegelian dialectic: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. But as always, Kierkegaard re-performs this

⁵⁷ EUD, 175.

⁵⁸ EUD, 175.

dialectic in order to break it open, in order to expose the synthesis to the impossibility of its completion. Crucially, the synthesis of the dialectic here occurs not in a concept but in a *single individual*, namely, Anna, and what occurs in her is not the presentation or externalization of a scientific idea but the hiddenness and upbuilding of a lived movement that cannot as such be represented in discourse. Anna does not represent the completed synthesis of time and eternity. She is not the “third factor” in which the poles of the dialectic are synthesized. She is, rather, a “contradiction,” a paradox, an apophatic soul, the hole in the heart of the dialectic in which time gapes open as it is caressed by eternity. She is a vanishing act in the movement of holding herself open to a future that withdraws from conscription into any knowledge or anticipation.

Kierkegaard’s treatment of Anna in 1844 parallels his treatment of Abraham in 1843 in *Fear and Trembling*. Both are figures of apophatic beginnings. Their names both begin with the silent beginning of the alphabet in which the mouth must gape open before it utters any speech. Both perform the silent rupture of the dialectical production of ideal meaning. In the movement of his faith, “Abraham remains silent.”⁵⁹ Likewise with the movement of Anna’s patience: “‘She is in silence’ with her expectancy.”⁶⁰ Moreover, both perform an apophatic comportment to the future, an apophatic hope, through their relation to children—Abraham to Isaac, Anna to the infant Jesus. Abraham lets Isaac go into a future from which he will return only by virtue of the absurd, that is, unexpectedly, freely, no longer (because he never was) Abraham’s possession but a miraculous gift. And as I will show, Anna enacts a similar letting go, a *Gelassenheit*, in relation to the coming of the messiah. It will remain for her a coming without end, a future from which she demands no fulfillment, a future that fulfills itself in the present only by filling the present with expectancy, with apophatic hope.

⁵⁹ FTR, 113.

⁶⁰ EUD, 212.

Kierkegaard's imaginative reconstruction of Anna is perhaps the most subversive proto-feminist gesture in his entire authorship, a gesture that, significantly, coincides with one of its most interesting apophatic moments. Not only is a woman brought forward as a paragon of faith within a culture in which "women were regarded as more imperfect than men,"⁶¹ but Kierkegaard presses the point that Anna is a woman who has no attachments either to men or to children. Anna is a widow who has lived the majority of her life as such, having lost her husband after a short seven year marriage that yielded no children. For her, "every external bond was dissolved."⁶² From the point of view of a culture and society in which a woman's attachments to men and to children are what make her, "her life was finished, her expectancy disappointed—she who had expected to live a long time with her husband and to die remembered by a family and relatives."⁶³ Nothing surrounds Anna by means of which she can obtain proper identity and recognition. She stands alone. Yet precisely in this solitude she is the mother of faith.

Kierkegaard also emphasizes that Anna's life has been given over to the work of mourning and grieving her late husband. What she has chosen to do with her solitude is remain with her grief and not seek new attachments. And in this way "she chose to remain true to herself."⁶⁴ Kierkegaard fiercely defends Anna's choice to remain true to herself by abiding with her grief over against voices that would pity her or would counsel her to act differently, perhaps to get over her grief and seek new attachments. He writes:

Let us not upset the venerable woman with our plans; let us not seek to console with the sagacious advice of people who do not know what inconsolableness is. Eighteen centuries and more have passed; she does not need our help now any more than she needed it then. We shall not hinder her in following the inclination of her heart; we shall

⁶¹ EUD, 218.

⁶² EUD, 209.

⁶³ EUD, 209.

⁶⁴ EUD, 209.

not be in a hurry to attire her in the victorious armor of despair or in the mourning weeds of slow deterioration. After all, she is the object of our contemplation, and there are things in life into which we should not seek to poetize our thoughts but from which we ourselves should learn; there are things in life over which we should not weep but from which we should learn to weep over ourselves.

Her choice is made. It did not happen yesterday or the day before yesterday so that we should be ready with our assistance to get it changed. Her choice is made.⁶⁵

Anna has made the choice of patience with her grief, and let no reader take that away from her or pretend to know how she should act.

It is possible, parenthetically, to hear in this passage not only a defense of Anna but also an act of self-defense and self-care coming from Kierkegaard's pen. Kierkegaard was no stranger to the grief of the premature end of an intimate relationship, the grief of a synthesis that was "not completed." This discourse was written only two years after his break from Regine Olsen, a break whose grief clearly stayed with him the rest of his life. And like Anna, he sought no new public attachments. He patiently abided with his grief, holding it and working with it in the solitude of his writing, the way Anna "never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day" (Luke 2:37). Like all of Kierkegaard's writing, his own self is at play here—and I do mean *play*—this time hidden under the guise of a grieving woman.

I venture this reading not in order to indulge in speculation about Kierkegaard's personal life but in order to open up a particular point of view on his authorship, one that relates to the peculiar kind of apophasis at work within it. Kierkegaard's practices of reading and writing, what one might loosely call his hermeneutics, are rooted in the impossibility of ever getting away from the self, from its never ceasing interpretation, reformulation, and need for care. Kierkegaard's authorship is one long exercise in self-care, in "the care of the self" as Foucault would call it. And the particular self that Kierkegaard was called to care for is one riven by scenes of rupture

⁶⁵ EUD, 209.

and non-completion, scenes endlessly restaged throughout the authorship. What is staged in these scenes, at times explicitly and at times more indirectly, is that particular apophatic affect I have been tracing throughout this dissertation, namely, *Sorg*, which should be translated equally as “longing” and “sorrow,” or “sorrowful longing.” In the most abstract sense, it is the touching, or what I have called the caressing, of time by eternity that gives birth to such sorrowful longing, for it is eternity that simply is the event of non-completion and withdrawal, that which holds time open in and through longing. Such caressing, however, is never abstract. It never takes place “as such.” It always touches and plays itself out within the most intimate folds and movements of a lived existence, folds and movements that are the endless preoccupation of Kierkegaard’s writing. If Franke is right that apophasis concerns ultimately “what refuses to yield itself fully to scientific research and demands rather something of the order of personal witness,”⁶⁶ then it is possible to hear Kierkegaard’s authorship as an apophatic performance through and through, even and especially when it is most intimate and singular.

Back to Anna. It is a “woman who is busy consoling herself over the loss of her late husband” who appears “as the witness of expectancy in the hour when the expectancy of the human race has its fulfillment.”⁶⁷ In other words, it is precisely one faithful in mourning who becomes a figure of faithful expectancy, of openness to the coming of the messiah. The connection between mourning and expectancy is not made explicit in the discourse, but I want to offer an interpretation. It is because Anna is *faithful to an absence* that she also becomes faithful to the coming of the messiah. It is as if her faithfulness to the loss of her husband is also her faithfulness to the messiah, to the messiah not present but *to come*. Crucially, however, the relation between Anna’s mourning and her expectancy is not structured by an economy of lack

⁶⁶ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 6.

⁶⁷ EUD, 210.

or wish fulfillment. Anna does not hope that the messiah will make up for the lack she now suffers with the loss of her husband. Rather, one might say, the messiah is simply this: that her loss does not become lack and therefore despair but, miraculously, an occasion to remain open, opened out toward a future and a coming of which she makes no demands but before which she waits patiently.

Kierkegaard paints a picture for the reader of Anna's patient expectancy rooted in mourning:

My listener, let your thoughts dwell on this venerable woman, whose mind is among the graves and now, although well on in years, nevertheless stands as the eternal's young fiancée. This tranquility in her eyes that nevertheless is expectant, this gentleness that is reconciled to life and nevertheless is expectant, this quiet integrity that is femininely occupied with recollection and nevertheless is expectant, this humble self-denial that nevertheless is expectant, this devout heart that covets nothing more and nevertheless is waiting in suspense; beyond flowering nevertheless still vigorous, forsaken nevertheless not withered, childless nevertheless not barren, bent with years and stooped nevertheless not broken—a widow, nevertheless betrothed, 'she is in silence' with her expectancy.⁶⁸

The refrain of "nevertheless" in this passage signals the transformation of her loss into patient expectancy, a transformation that has no logical or ontological mechanism, no necessity. It is not the outcome of any dialectical synthesis or immanent process. It is, rather, an event, an event of becoming and remaining open with possibility, "waiting in suspense" before the future even though everything in time would speak of Anna's right to close up in despair. Kierkegaard writes:

My listener, however you judge concerning that which is indeed up to each one to decide on his own in such a way that one who makes the opposite choice can be no less praiseworthy, this much is nevertheless certain—the eyes of the woman who speedily recovers from the pain of the loss of her husband are hardly open to the expectancy that is not the fruit of temporality but that awakens only in the person who gave up the temporal to gain the eternal and then found the grace to see eternity as an expectancy in time.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ EUD, 212.

⁶⁹ EUD, 218.

It is *grace* that is the event of Anna's transformation, grace that holds time and eternity together in the secrecy of her heart, grace that births possibility and patience amidst suffering, grace that keeps her open with expectancy *in* time even though she no longer expects anything determinate *of* time. It is grace that suspends logical and ontological necessity as well as "probabilities and calculations"⁷⁰ with an expectancy that opens itself to the in-coming outside. Anna is by grace "the eternal's young fiancée," her life reduplicated into an infinite beginning that each instant renews itself as patience, as a silent waiting in suspense.

In Luke's narrative, the messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, arrives. The fulfillment comes. In Kierkegaard's discourse, however, it is a mark of Anna's expectancy and patience that she does not attach herself to the messiah upon his arrival. She remains detached or released from Jesus even as he arrives. Kierkegaard writes of Anna and Simeon that "they were not concerned about the fulfillment in the same way as the person who meets its coming with a greeting of welcome, but they were like one who bids the fulfillment farewell."⁷¹ One could say that Anna's expectancy remains for her a messianism without a messiah, even as she sees Jesus with her own eyes. Anna lets go of precisely that which she awaits. She remains released even in relation to the arrival of that which she expects. Not even the arrival of the messiah is an occasion to transform expectancy into apprehension, repetition into recollection, an open future into a determinate past and present. The arrival of Jesus only *confirms* her in her expectancy, in her suspense.

Indeed, Kierkegaard raises the question of whether Anna's expectancy would have been disappointed if the messiah had failed to come, if the fulfillment had not presented itself to her eyes. Kierkegaard answers:

And even if it had failed to come, she still would not have been disappointed. The fulfillment came; at the same moment, just like Simeon, she desires only to depart, that

⁷⁰ EUD, 221.

⁷¹ EUD, 208.

is, not to remain with the fulfillment and yet in another sense to enter into the fulfillment...By failing to come, the outcome could not essentially deceive her, and by coming too late it could not disappoint her...Her joy was precisely those many years in which she had been faithful night and day to her expectancy!⁷²

Anna “departs” from the fulfillment in order to enter it. Quite the paradox! Again, the paradox is that the posture of expectancy *is* the fulfillment, and *not even the arrival of Jesus* is allowed to fill expectancy with anything else than redoubled expectancy. Jesus does not become the arrival of presence. Or the arrival of Jesus’ presence presses Anna further into her expectancy, into a joy that lives only through its reduplication upon itself, the joy of patient waiting, a joy that does not defend itself against grief by attempting to apprehend an object, but a joy that mingles with grief as it remains faithful to and moves toward an absence.

“Patience in Expectancy,” I want to suggest, ought to be regarded as an apophatic christological text, a text in which Jesus is not yet that which secures a Christian identity over against other identities, religious or otherwise. With this discourse we are in that apophatic or deconstructive gap between Judaism and Christianity, in the passage from one to the other that I examined in the last chapter through Jean-Luc Nancy’s reading of the book of James. Anna is this passage, a breaking open to the coming of the messiah that has not yet closed down into an identity. Anna wanders away from any Christian identity in order to hold herself in this gap, in this suspense.

iv

Turning to Jean-Luc Nancy once again, I want to conclude my reading of Kierkegaard’s Anna by considering the relation between her expectancy and her relation to her late husband. I want to suggest that Anna’s relation to the coming of the messiah as an apophatic in-coming is at heart, in *her* heart, a certain keeping-alive of her relation to her husband, a way of holding the relation

⁷² EUD, 224.

open to a “living on” or a “survivance” as Derrida would put it. The messiah, I might say, is this: that our relations, even to the dead, never cease to live and survive. They are never shut down or finished but remain open to a future we cannot anticipate or secure but in relation to which we may remain expectant.

In *Adoration*, Nancy considers the living-on of relation, that “*relation* does not die,” by recounting a conversation with his mother “on resurrection several years after the death of my father.”⁷³ Nancy recounts his mother saying to him: “Allow me to think that there is a place where I shall find him again.”⁷⁴ He notes that “she was right,” relating his mother’s request to Derrida’s words spoken through his son at his funeral: “I love you and I am smiling at you from wherever I might be.”⁷⁵ Nancy goes on to say that even the dead occupy “a place and a being as a place and a being of relation, of encounter or a happy encounter.”⁷⁶ He continues:

Of course, the dead are definitively, irreversibly, and unbearably absent, and more than absent: disappeared, abolished. Of course, no work of mourning ever reduces this abolition. Yet if we do not sink into melancholy, which is to die in our turn in the midst of life—becoming one of the living dead but not rejoining the life of the dead person for all that, instead petrifying our relation to him—we live, we survive ‘our dead’ (as one says), and this cannot be reduced to an egotistical instinct. It is the continuance of relation, and it can be the awaiting and the approach of a happy encounter in an unheard-of place and according to an unknown mode of being.

Insofar as I think it is important to keep faith apart from belief, I think one can say that. It does not proceed from an illusion or from an assurance in the complete absence of any representation. And what passes between the two regimes is concerned with affect, not with the concept. And affect is relation, one could say.⁷⁷

Anna’s patience in expectancy, her relation to the messiah, is the keeping alive of her affect, her joy colored with mourning, which is to say the keeping alive of her relation to the one whose absence she mourns. She does not allow the relation to petrify, which would be to allow herself

⁷³ Nancy, *Adoration*, 92.

⁷⁴ Nancy, *Adoration*, 92.

⁷⁵ Nancy, *Adoration*, 92.

⁷⁶ Nancy, *Adoration*, 92.

⁷⁷ Nancy, *Adoration*, 92.

to sink into despair. Nor does she demand its full or fixed presence, which would simply be another form of despair. Her soul, writes Kierkegaard, “remains gentle,”⁷⁸ open to the one toward whom she goes as toward an absence, awaiting a happy encounter of which there is no concept, only an unknown, unheard of hope.

⁷⁸ EUD, 26.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE: HOLDING NOTHING IN COMMON

You hold nothing; you are unable to hold or retain anything, and that is precisely what you must love and know. That is what there is of a knowledge and a love. Love what escapes you. Love the one who goes. Love that he goes. – Jean-Luc Nancy¹

The one who loves discovers nothing. – Kierkegaard²

i

In this last chapter, I'd like to turn my attention to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. It would have been possible, perhaps, to have written this entire dissertation as a conversation with *Works of Love*. Every major theme I have addressed in the previous five chapters—time, eternity, form, style, indirection, reduplication, action, faith, hope, love, etc.—is in some way performed in this text. *Works of Love* is an enormous textual landscape, a universe unto itself. It is so full of subtlety and richness, philosophically, theologically, and spiritually, that any commentary should probably admit its defeat before it begins. I say this not in order to hold the text beyond criticism but to confess non-mastery of *Works of Love*. I cannot offer anything like an exhaustive reading of it, and this chapter is not an attempt at such.

Thankfully, Kierkegaard's texts do not ask to be mastered. They ask to be given a chance, a hearing or viewing that might move, disrupt, and edify the reader in some singular way. Love, moreover, and perhaps more importantly, is the non-masterable *par excellence*. In the preface to

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 37.

² WL, 287.

Works of Love, Kierkegaard confesses his own non-mastery and sets an apophatic stage for what follows:

[These deliberations] are about *works of love*, not as if hereby all its works were now added up and described, oh, far from it; not as if even the particular work described were described once and for all, far from it, God be praised! Something that in its total richness is *essentially* inexhaustible is also in its smallest work *essentially* indescribable just because essentially it is totally present everywhere and *essentially* cannot be described.³

Love will not submit to any mediation or objectification. It withdraws itself from the possibility of any reflective determination by consciousness. Love *is* this withdrawal, a withdrawal that is simultaneously an excess, an excessive opening that is “inexhaustible,” inexhaustibly present everywhere. As such, love is *essentially* indescribable, indescribable even in itself and for itself. It is not as if love *could* be described if one could only gain a speculative position on it, which is the goal of Hegel’s treatment of Christianity, summed up in the Johannine dictum “God is love,” in his *Philosophy of Religion*. Love, rather, is the impossibility of its being thought, and this impossibility is what thought must expose itself to. For Kierkegaard, thought must allow itself to be undone in and through and with love. This requires that any discourse on love acquire a *doxological* rather than a speculative style and mood. Love is not an object of thought. It is a movement of praise, a joyous abandon. *Works of Love* is itself a work of love, a lover’s discourse, a “work of love in praising love.”⁴ Love is thought only in its being praised, in speaking from and in and with love. Content, again, reduplicates itself in and through form, a form that withdraws from the desire for speculative mastery.

What I would like to do in this final chapter is a little praising of my own. This will involve a reduplication or repetition of some of the territory I have traversed in previous chapters. Specifically, I want to return to “reduplication” itself in order to clarify how love, for

³ WL, 3.

⁴ WL, 345.

Kierkegaard, is the site of the mystical union between God, the soul, and the neighbor, a union that is simultaneously an infinite difference and distance. In *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, David Law denies that mystical union plays any role in Kierkegaard's thought. I want to open the possibility of a different reading, one in which mystical union is at the heart of his thought. What Law misses is the *ethical* inflection that mystical union acquires in Kierkegaard, an inflection already present in Eckhart.⁵ Mystical union is an *action*, an activation of the soul, a repetition of its joyous abandon into the movement of love. What God activates in the soul, indeed *as* the soul, is a splitting open between self and other, an opening that self and other share and into which they are abandoned, yet one that is precisely the confirmation of an irreducible difference and distance. Self and neighbor are "identical" or "equal" [*Ligelige*] in God, for Kierkegaard, yet what they share identically in God, indeed *as God*, is the absence of any common being or position, a radical alterity, the breaking out and birth of singularity. This is what Kierkegaard means by calling God the "middle term" between self and neighbor. God is the infinite qualitative difference between self and neighbor.

To love, therefore, is not to share a common position but to share the impossibility of a common position, the impossibility of the reduction of relation to anything closed and determinate. This is not to give up being in common in favor of a closed solitude. It is, rather, to resolve to be in common only by holding nothing in common, by holding open the space within which singularity, and therefore relation and responsibility, is absolute. Kierkegaard's polemic against *Elskov* (romantic or erotic love) in *Works of Love* is at heart a critique of the anxious drive to close up the spacing of difference between self and other, the drive to turn love into a

⁵ Eckhart: "...one must sometimes leave such a state of joy for a better one of love, and sometimes to perform a work of love where it is needed, whether it be spiritual or bodily. As I have said before, if a man were in an ecstasy as St. Paul was (2 Cor. 12:2-4), and if he knew of a sick person who needed a bowl of soup from him, I would consider it far better if you were to leave that rapture out of love and help the needy person out of greater love."

completion. It is a critique of the fantasy that self and other could merge into a closed “one,” a closure that is equal to the desire for death and mastery, the death of relation as irreducible and un-masterable difference. (It is a critique, parenthetically, that in a very different context could be turned to address that disgusting eros or desire that reduces entire populations to the unity of ashes and mass graves, which is the forced denial of relation and difference, a denial of the self as an event of relation, essentially vulnerable, fragile, and exposed.)

To love is to grant to oneself and to the neighbor an irreducible and absolute uniqueness, to continually hold open the possibility of an intimate and singular line of flight for oneself and the other, a possibility that is the only possibility of relation, of life rather than death. Love lets the neighbor, even the most intimate neighbors, our lovers, our friends, our children, be passers-by in flight, those whom we cannot possess or penetrate or grasp, whom we can only touch and caress as they pass by, as they leave us with nothing but infinite longing. God is nothing other than the happening of this passage, this caress, this longing, this holding nothing in common. God is this: “I love you more than all that has been thought and can be thought. I give my soul to you.”⁶

In this chapter I also want to turn one final time to Jean-Luc Nancy, to his essay “Shattered Love” [*L’Amour En Éclats*]. This essay is Nancy’s own work of praising love as the breaking out and birth of singularity. All the way down, irreducibly, existence is shattered with love, with a love that does not gather itself into or proceed from a totality or completion but that is itself only a shattering, a breaking. “Shattering,” however, does not translate fully the richness of *éclater*, which in the French has connotations of bursting, shining, glittering, and sparking. Rather than a shattered pane of glass, one might think of the bursting and glittering of a firework

⁶ Henriette Vogel to Heinrich von Kleist, quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, “Shattered Love,” in *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 245.

across a night sky. Love is the spasm and opening of the night sky that in an instant, and only for an instant, releases a glittering and shattered multiplicity, a melee of sparks, each with its own line of flight, holding in common only the night sky against which they shine with the eternity of the moment. For Kierkegaard, too, existence, all the way down, all the way into its bottomless “ground,” is the breaking out of love “along many paths.”⁷ Existence comes to birth from a “gushing spring”⁸ that overflows into infinitely singular tributaries and streams, each slipping, twisting, and dancing with its own movements. Existence is a melee of single individuals who hold nothing in common, whose duty it is to *hold* that nothing, and in holding to keep each other in existence, in an “unfathomable connectedness,”⁹ for the instant we are given together. “To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living.”¹⁰

ii

The most immediate predecessor to Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* is Fichte’s 1806 text, *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben* [The Way Towards the Blessed Life], which Kierkegaard would have had exposure to through the teaching of Hans Martensen. In this text, Fichte aims to think love as the “bond” of existence, that which bonds existence to the absolute. Fichte’s text sets up in significant ways what Kierkegaard would go on to do in *Works of Love*. It is this Fichtean background of *Works of Love* that can be helpful in clarifying the kind of mystical union operative in Kierkegaard, for it is Fichte who most fully transforms the mystical subject, in particular an Eckhartian mystical subject, into an *ethical* subject whose unity with the ground of

⁷ WL, 9.

⁸ WL, 10.

⁹ WL, 9.

¹⁰ WL, 375.

existence through love expresses itself through infinite action and striving.¹¹ What I want to show here is how *Works of Love* both appropriates and critiques this Fichtean transformation.¹²

Fichte's text is premised upon a reappropriation of Neoplatonism, specifically an Eckhartian Neoplatonism, in two central respects: in its affirmation of an apophatic absolute and in its affirmation of the inherently self-manifesting nature of the absolute in human subjectivity as love. These two affirmations are expressed by a fundamental distinction that runs through the text, that between being (*Seyn*) and existence (*Daseyn*). "Being" refers to the absolute that as such is hidden and unknowable, "being in itself enclosed and hidden,"¹³ as Fichte puts it. "Existence" refers to the absolute insofar as it is "outside of its being,"¹⁴ insofar as being stands out—ex-ists—and appears. Being reduplicates itself into existence through "reflection," by becoming conscious of itself, or "for itself."

However, unlike Hegel, Fichte does not allow consciousness to perform a synthesis between the in-itself and the for-itself. He allows them to remain opposed, absolutely. Entering into reflection, being shows itself only by hiding itself. Being becomes what Fichte calls *essence*, it "absolutely immediately changes its incomprehensible form, which can only be described as pure life and action, into an essence (*Wesen*)."¹⁵ This distinction between being and essence, between the in-itself and the for-itself of the absolute, does not undergo mediation. Being remains hidden as existence stands out and appears within it and from it. There remains an unsublated alterity within the absolute itself. Moreover, for Fichte, it is *love* that holds open and traverses, but does not sublimate, this alterity within the absolute. It is love that both distinguishes

¹¹ See Katharina Cemig, *Mystic und Ethik bei Meister Eckhart und Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (Peter Lang, 1999).

¹² For what follows on the relation between Kierkegaard and Fichte, I am dependent also on David Kangas' essay, "Like for Like: The Metaphysical Problematic of Kierkegaard's Works of Love," in *Ethik der Liebe: Studien zu Kierkegaards "Taten der Liebe"* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 123-138. Hereafter, "Like for Like."

¹³ Kangas, "Like for Like," 125.

¹⁴ Kangas, "Like for Like," 125.

¹⁵ Kangas, "Like for Like," 125.

and unites being and essence, or being and reflection, allowing the former to remain hidden even as it manifests itself in the latter. Love is the “bond of pure being and reflection.” It is “the immediate self-supporting and self-maintaining life of the absolute itself.”¹⁶

This alterity within the absolute, for Fichte, is the opening within the absolute of an inwardness or interiority that in turn is the condition for the self-manifestation of the absolute. Were there not a self-reflexivity within the absolute, the division between being and essence, manifestation could not occur. However, and this will be absolutely crucial for Kierkegaard, in the movement of manifestation, the duality of being and essence is not mediated such that manifestation becomes the manifestation of the concept on its way to the Idea, a manifestation that banishes hiddenness. That is the path Hegel will take. For Fichte, the self-manifestation of the absolute in and through human subjectivity maintains the alterity between being and reflection, or being and knowledge, an alterity that constitutes the self-manifestation of the absolute as a manifestation of *life* that exceeds the concept, *action* that exceeds reflection, what both Fichte and Kierkegaard will call the “hidden life” of love. Fichte writes:

Love divides the in-itself dead being into a two-fold being, setting itself forth in front of itself. It makes itself thereby into an “I” or self that beholds itself and knows of itself. In this “I-ness” lies the root of all life. Again, love reunites and inwardly binds together the divided I... The latter unity, in which duality is not sublated (*aufgehoben*) but eternally remains, is precisely life.¹⁷

Human subjectivity, for Fichte, is the site of a divided I, an I divided between being and essence, or being and knowledge. This division is bound together in love with a binding that is never sublated. This is the movement of life, life as the movement of eternal or absolute love, a movement in which the self manifests or gives itself in love, *as love*, in excess of any reduction to knowledge.

¹⁶ Kangas, “Like for Like,” 126.

¹⁷ Kangas, “Like for Like,” 126.

This is a binding or union does not result in any identity on the on the plane of reflection, the identity between subject and object, or thought and being, that would yield knowledge of the absolute. The movement of love transcends reason. It transcends all knowledge, reflection, and essence. It occurs essentially prior to them as their origin and possibility. Again, this is an apophatic move standard in Neoplatonism: the origin is essentially withdrawn and hidden. Fichte writes, “love is therefore higher than all reason; it is itself the source of reason and the root of all reality.”¹⁸ Love cannot enter into the reflective determination of consciousness. Human subjectivity maintains its bond to love, to the absolute, only in an “affect,” in an affect that keeps reason *alive*, opened beyond itself. Kierkegaard will appropriate all of this.¹⁹

He will appropriate it, though, only by radicalizing it. Kierkegaard carries forward Fichte’s distinction between being and essence, what he will call the distinction between the eternal and the temporal. He also, with Fichte, regards love as the binding between the temporal and the eternal that occurs in excess of knowledge. Kierkegaard writes, “What is it, namely, that binds the temporal and eternity, what else but love, which for that reason is before everything and remains after everything is gone.”²⁰ Radically prior to and in excess of the temporal, love is “heterogeneous”²¹ or incommensurable with the temporal, an incommensurability that keeps the temporal *alive*, open beyond any closure into itself.

However, this disjunction between being and essence, eternity and time, undergoes two essential transformations in Kierkegaard. The first is that Kierkegaard posits *sin* as the disjunction between the temporal and the eternal, a rupture in the fabric of the absolute more

¹⁸ Kangas, “Like for Like,” 126.

¹⁹ As will Schleiermacher, for whom human subjectivity is bound to the absolute not in cognition but via the “feeling of absolute dependence.”

²⁰ WL, 6.

²¹ WL, 6.

radical than what Fichte posits between being and essence. This is what allows Kierkegaard to think the real possibility of *despair*, the temporal closed into itself, the self-mutilation of the finite. It is also what allows him to think the bond of love more radically. For Fichte, being and essence are simply and as such bound by love. Existence is always already, transcendently, held together with love as a “bare fact.” For Kierkegaard, by contrast, love must *traverse the rupture* opened by sin in order to establish the bond between the temporal and the eternal, a bond that is continually threatened by sin, by the drive of the temporal to close into and destroy itself. The bond of love, the origin of time, paradoxically, must come into existence in time. Love must come into time and establish its bond there by exposing itself to the horror of sin and by holding onto the beloved, maintaining its touch with the beloved even when the beloved only knows how to despairingly hate itself and its others. This love, of course, comes to bear a name: Jesus. In the name of Jesus, the bond of love traverses every distance, enters into every despair, even the most intimate and unspeakable of despairs, and there offers its touch, its caress, its opening. This opening is the (re)birth of affect, but again radicalized, subjectivity raised to an infinite pitch, undone with gratitude, with weeping, longing, sorrowing, joying, and abandon.

The second transformation that the relation between being and existence will undergo in Kierkegaard relates to his apophatic concept of the absolute as infinite reduplication. In Fichte, it is the very relation between being and existence that is a reduplication. Being reduplicates itself into existence even though being as such remains hidden. This is also the case for Kierkegaard in the relation between the eternal and the temporal. However, Kierkegaard turns the apophatic screw one turn tighter. The eternal, for him, is also a “reduplication *in itself*,”²² that is, pure subjectivity. This is what makes Kierkegaard’s absolute irreducible to any order of *being*, not

²² WL, 280.

even Fichte's apophatic being that is pure act. Fichte's absolute is the be-ing of beings.

Kierkegaard's absolute is the nothin-ing of beings, beings thrown into existence with abandon, without ground, without why.

This is what puts Kierkegaard closer to Eckhart, who affirms that as reduplication, God has neither being nor existence because God is the *cause* of being and existence.²³ For Fichte, existence is simply *there*, Da-seyn, eternally set over against being, standing out into appearance. The alterity between being and existence remains for him an immanent alterity within an order of being. For Eckhart and Kierkegaard, existence is not simply there. It *is* only in the instant of its being *given*. The alterity here is that between a transcendent origin and its effects, an origin whose transcendence does not ground its effects but rather is their un-ground, their gratuity. Kierkegaard thinks origin more radically than Fichte, as gift-ing rather than be-ing, as grace rather than fact. As Kangas puts it, "the 'bond of eternity' (love) acquires a double sense: it refers not merely to the relation between the temporal and the eternal, but to the *activity* that makes the relation possible."²⁴ Reduplication is that apophatic activity within the absolute, the activity that *is* the absolute, that makes the relation between the temporal and the eternal an economy of gift and excess. Actuality here names not the bare fact of existence but the instant of coming into existence, the instant of gratuity and grace that escapes both anticipation and recollection. Within this economy ethical striving is set within a wholly different light. The bond of love becomes the work of abandon, a loosening, a letting, an exposure or exposition before a wild opening.

iii

²³ See Eckhart, *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, trans. A. A. Maurer (Toronto, 1981), 48.

²⁴ Kangas, "Like for Like," 130.

To understand the form that mystical union takes in Kierkegaard, it is necessary to see how reduplication becomes an activity in the soul, indeed, the activity *of* the soul, God *as* the soul. The unity of God and soul, however, is not transcendental, as in Fichte, where God comes to name the immediate identity of the ego with itself, the transcendental ground of subjectivity, what Heidegger will call “onto-theo-egology.” The sort of union Kierkegaard affirms, rather, is a transcendent event, the self-gifting of the divine that follows the logic laid down by Eckhart in his sermon on eternal birth:

All must well up from within, out of God, if this birth is to shine with a really clear light. Your own efforts must cease and your faculties must serve God’s purposes, not your own. If this work is to be done, God alone must do it, and you must undergo it. Where you truly abandon your willing and knowing, God with his knowing truly and willingly goes in and shines there clearly...Do not fondly imagine that your reason can grow to the knowledge of God, for no natural light can help God to shine in you divinely. Your light must be utterly extinguished and go out of itself altogether, then God can shine in with his light, bringing back with him everything you forsook and a thousandfold more, besides the new form containing it all.²⁵

There is perhaps no more Kierkegaardian passage in all of Eckhart. The logic here is exactly that of the “double movement” of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, the movement in which Abraham gives up Isaac and receives him back in the same instant. Eckhart writes, “It is one flash, the being-ready and the pouring-in.”²⁶ The “being-ready” corresponds to the movement of “resignation” in *Fear and Trembling*, the becoming-ready to receive existence as a gift. In this becoming-ready the self gives up everything temporal and external in order to discover its “eternal validity.” Silentio writes, “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith, for only in infinite resignation do I become conscious of my eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by

²⁵ Eckhart, Sermon IV, in Pfeiffer, Franz, *Meister Eckhart* trans. C. de B. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 21.

²⁶ Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, 23.

virtue of faith.”²⁷ To relate to existence in faith, one must have broken with it and become identical to its eternal ground. However, this ground, for Kierkegaard (and Eckhart), is the *un-ground* of infinite reduplication. Becoming identical with *this* ground is immediately, in an instant, to be released back into existence without ground, “by virtue of the absurd.” The absolute is nothing but this event of releasement, the event of beings abandoned into existence without ground in which God is the “pouring-in” or “gushing” of their abandon. “Abandon” and “bringing back” are “one flash,” the instant of eternal return or repetition, the eternal repetition of abandon. In faith, one’s break with existence is never a breaking *away*. It is always a breaking *through*, a birth. Or as Silentio likes to say, a “dance.”

This Eckhartian logic is repeated in *Works of Love* in its affirmation that to love God is immediately to be given over to the work of loving the neighbor. Love of God has no meaning other than love of neighbor, loving one’s abandon or offering to the neighbor. To break with the temporal in order to gain the eternal is in the same instant to be given back into the temporal as a gift of love. Kierkegaard writes:

A person should begin with loving the unseen, God, because then he himself will learn what it is to love. But that he actually loves the unseen will be known by his loving the neighbor he sees; the more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the people he sees. It is not the reverse, that the more he rejects those he sees, the more he loves the unseen, since in that case God is turned into an unreal something, a delusion... As if God were envious of himself and of being loved, instead of the blessed God’s being merciful and therefore continually pointing away from himself, so to speak, and saying, “If you want to love me, then love the people you see; what you do for them, you do for me.” God is too exalted to be able to receive a person’s love directly, to say nothing of being able to take pleasure in what can please a fanatic... If you want to show that [your gift] is intended for God, then give it away, but with the thought of God. If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, then let it serve people, yet continually with the thought of God. God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he asks for his share for himself; he asks for everything, but as you bring it to him you immediately receive, if I may put it this way, a notice designating where it should be delivered further,

²⁷ FTR, 46.

because God does not ask for anything for himself, although he asks for everything from you.²⁸

One might say that God is the absolute outside of existence, “the unseen,” that opens itself absolutely within existence, as its beating heart, the repetition of its opening with love. To serve God is to serve this opening, to love the neighbor as a gift from the outside, as a gift to be opened under an open sky that “at every moment creates fresh air and a prospect.”²⁹ God reserves none of this outside as a position over against existence to which existence would be bound through a logic of sacrifice. “As if God were envious... God does not have a share in existence... God does not ask for anything for himself.” God eternally empties this outside into existence where it becomes not the dialectical production of *Sittlichkeit* (Hegel) but the infinite opening of existence. Love is the work of letting the outside of time return to and touch every time, making every moment an instant of beginning, love’s beginning.

Kierkegaard articulates the logic of this outside that empties itself into existence through the image of a hidden spring giving birth to a lake, an image Eckhart also uses.³⁰ There is perhaps no more Eckhartian passage in all of Kierkegaard than the following:

Where does love come from, where does it have its origin and its source, where is the place it has its abode from which it flows? Yes, this place is hidden or is secret. There is a place in a person’s innermost being; from this place flows the life of love, for “from the heart flows life.” But you cannot see this place; however deeply you penetrate, the origin eludes you in remoteness and hiddenness. Even when you have penetrated furthest in, the origin is always still a bit further in, like the source of the spring that is further away just when you are closest to it. From this place flows love along many paths, but along none of these paths can you force your way into its hidden origin... It is love’s desire and wish that its secret source and its hidden life in the innermost being may remain a secret... Love’s hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn it is an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person’s love originate even more deeply in God’s love. If there were no gushing spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither the little lake nor a human being’s love. Just as the quiet lake

²⁸ WL, 160-1.

²⁹ WL, 246.

³⁰ Eckhart, *Teacher and Preacher*, 19, 46.

originates darkly in the deep spring, so a human being's love originates mysteriously in God's love. Just as the quiet lake invites you to contemplate it but by the reflected image of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so also the mysterious origin of love in God's love prevents you from seeing its ground.³¹

God's love, here, is an *un-ground*, a ground that continually withdraws itself into secrecy in order to release love as a gushing spring that fills existence with its own emptying, its own nothin-ing. The withdrawal of the ground is simultaneously the instant of life gushing into existence, or existence as the gushing of life. God is this: that life springs into existence in the absence of any necessity or principle, from nothing, without reason, without why. The "secrecy" of the absolute is nothing but this absence of necessity and principle, the without-why-ness of existence, its absolute gratuity of which there can be no concept, only the heart's abandon.

Mystical union, here, acquires a thoroughly ethical or existential form. The without-why-ness of existence, its absolute gratuity, becomes in *Works of Love* the ethical duty to love the neighbor without preference, without why. This is to love only by holding nothing in common with the neighbor, by holding in common the nothing that is our "unfathomable connectedness." To love the neighbor out of preference, because they reflect back to me my own determinate ego, is to give love a principle, a foundation, a ground, a why. *Works of Love* deconstructs or destructs this onto-theo-egological ground of ethics. The neighbor, writes Kierkegaard, is not "the *other self*, the *other I*." Rather, "the neighbor is the *other you*."³² *The other you*, a self equally and identically addressed by God, that is, by the gratuity of existence, and as such an absolute secret, a singular line of flight infinitely irreducible to my line of flight, although by grace, with mercy, in love, touching my flight, making it swerve with longing.

³¹ WL, 8-10.

³² WL, 53.

This is not to banish reflection or recognition from the scene of love. It is to reconfigure the scene of love as an exposure to its own groundlessness, a scene of exposure to the beloved as a gratuitous gift. What is reflected back to me in the neighbor I see is not a determinate self or ego but our mutual exposure and abandon, the absolute gratuity of the instant of existence we share. In love, re-flection becomes *de*-flection, self and neighbor together turned toward an infinite outside rather than locked in a battle for recognition. This is what Kierkegaard means when he writes, “the neighbor is the utterly unrecognizable dissimilarity between persons or is the eternal equality before God.”³³ And further: “love is recognizable only by love.”³⁴ What I “see” in the neighbor, in the beloved, is not any *objective* dissimilarity but an *utterly unrecognizable* dissimilarity, a singularity, a single individual who as such is hidden from any objective recognition. Kierkegaard speaks of a “hidden anxiety that makes erotic love and friendship dependent upon their objects, an anxiety that can kindle jealousy, the anxiety that can bring one to despair.”³⁵ This is why he writes that “one sees the neighbor only with closed eyes.”³⁶ Love sees the neighbor apophatically, released from the anxious, objectifying gaze whose secret is its “morbidity.”³⁷ Love sees only love within the neighbor, loving forth that love rather than attaching itself to and smothering the beloved with objective characteristics, demands, and expectations.

Such apophatic seeing is a repetition and loving forth in the neighbor of the love that God is in the self. Kierkegaard writes, “It is infinite loving that...no one, no one, so lovingly discovers the slightest love in you as God does. God’s relation to a human being is at every

³³ WL, 68.

³⁴ WL, 66.

³⁵ WL, 66.

³⁶ WL, 68.

³⁷ WL, 66.

moment to infinitize what is in that human being at every moment.”³⁸ This is Kierkegaard’s version of Eckhart’s line, “the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” The work of God in the soul is to infinitize the self as a gift of love, to redouble the love in a person to excess. In every soul there is a spark of love, the spark of singularity, the spark that is the ground of the soul, as Eckhart puts it. God *is* this spark—and its reduplication into a blaze. Or God *is* the hidden spring deep within a person’s innermost being—and its gushing overflow. Such reduplication in the self becomes immediately a breaking out of love for the neighbor in which the self joins God in loving forth the love in that “other you.” Such a self abandoned to love “does not need people just to have someone to love, but he needs to love people.”³⁹ This is the logic of mystical union in Kierkegaard, the self given birth within God’s longing to love, birthing in turn that very love in the neighbor, reduplicating the divine life into existence, to excess. This is exactly the logic of Eckhart’s *Gottesburt*, only with Kierkegaard one gives birth to God simultaneously in oneself and in the neighbor as the joyful gushing of their infinite difference.

iv

Nancy’s essay “Shattered Love” in so many ways beats with a Kierkegaardian heart, with the rhythm and abandon of an exposure to an infinite outside that shatters the dialectical mediation of the self in the other. I want to conclude with this essay not only because Nancy is such a fun dance partner—one should always end with dancing!—but also because this essay can help set up an articulation of what I might tentatively call Kierkegaard’s apophatic ontology. I have been resisting ontology throughout this dissertation, and I don’t intend to undo that here, to go back on my claim that edification exceeds ontology. But I also want to open the possibility that the claim

³⁸ WL, 384.

³⁹ WL, 67.

that edification exceeds ontology is also a kind of ontological claim, specifically about the absolutely singular nature of being. Being is always only singular, always only shattered into an irreducible (i.e. apophatic) multiplicity. Kierkegaard's *hiin Enkelte*, "that one," is, one might venture, an ontological category, yet one that as such insists on the impossibility of any *general* ontology. *Hiin Enkelte*, as Nancy puts it, is "the theft of generality."⁴⁰ This is why, for Nancy, and I would claim also for Kierkegaard, the very name of the absolute is "I love you."⁴¹ That is, the absolute is without name. The absolute, being as such, is nothing other than the joy and wonder of "I love you." I, this absolutely singular being, love you, this absolutely singular other.

To be unable to say, or rather *be*, "I love you" is to be closed into oneself with the self-mutilation of despair, engaged in the self-annihilation of one's very being. The possibility of despair, then, would be an *ontological* possibility, not merely a "psychological" one, the real risk and trembling at the heart of being, its lack of guarantee, the possibility that one can pass through existence without discovering one's self, that is, one's "I love you."⁴² Faith, conversely, would be nothing but this discovery, the birth of love in the self. Again: "To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living."⁴³ "One would thus define," writes Nancy, "an ontological necessity of love."⁴⁴ Such necessity, however, "is not

⁴⁰ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 270.

⁴¹ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 265.

⁴² SUD, 27-8: "And when the hour glass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then—whether you were man or woman, rich or poor, dependent or independent, fortunate or unfortunate, whether you ranked with royalty and wore a glittering crown or in humble obscurity bore toil and the heat of the day, whether the magnificence encompassing you surpassed all human description or the most severe and ignominious human judgment befell you—eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not, whether you have despaired in such a way that you did not realize that you were in despair, or in such a way that you covertly carried this sickness inside of you as your gnawing secret, as a fruit of sinful love under your heart, or in such a way that you, a terror to others, raged in despair. And if so, if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourself in despair."

⁴³ WL, 375.

⁴⁴ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 273.

established as a structure of being or as its principle, and even less as its subjectivity [in the Hegelian sense]. One would thus define a necessity without a law, or a law without necessity, thus: the heart of being within love, and love in surplus of being.”⁴⁵ There is no “as such” of love, no *structural* necessity that schematizes its birth. “But there is this brilliant, shattering constitution of being.”⁴⁶ When Kierkegaard says that “love is the fulfilling of the law,”⁴⁷ he means that love is the filling of the law with such shattering, with the absolutely free necessity that I, this absolutely singular self, may love you, also an absolutely singular self, with a love irreducible to any generality, as *that* one.

At the heart of Nancy’s essay is a claim about—but more than a claim, a discourse offered in praise of—the heart, the heart of being, being *as* a heart. He writes:

The Absolute loves us... Love is at the heart of being. Again it is necessary that being have a heart, or still more rigorously, that being be a heart. “The heart of being” means nothing but the being of being, that by virtue of which it is being. To suppose that “the being of being,” or “the essence of being,” is an expression endowed with meaning, it would be necessary to suppose that the essence of being is something like a heart—that is to say: that which alone is capable of love.⁴⁸

The essay also turns on a further claim or cadence, namely, “Now this is precisely what has never been attested by philosophy.”⁴⁹ The heart of being, being as a heart, has not been attested by philosophy not because philosophy has not attempted to think love. On the contrary, Nancy acknowledges that the West has been and remains obsessed with love. Yet precisely in this obsession something has escaped or been missed by philosophy, namely, that love as such escapes and slips away from philosophy, from a return to itself in thought. In its very attempt to

⁴⁵ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

⁴⁶ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

⁴⁷ WL, 91.

⁴⁸ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 251-2.

⁴⁹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 252.

think love, philosophy has missed love as the unthinkable, and this is what must be thought.

What must be thought is love as “inexhaustible” and “essentially indescribable,” as Kierkegaard puts it.

Nancy locates this missing, the missing that occurs in philosophy’s attempt to master love, at the source of the Western discourse on love, Plato’s *Symposium*. He writes:

For all its generosity, the *Symposium* also exercises a mastery over love. At any rate, we cannot fail to read or to deduce here, in the order and the choices of philosophical knowledge, a truth regarding love, one that assigns its experience and hierarchizes its moments by substituting the impatience and *conatus* of desire for its joyous abandon.⁵⁰

Nancy claims that this desire for mastery runs right through the Western tradition, climaxing, one might say orgasming, in Hegel, but still very much alive today in the form of “sexology, marriage counseling, newsstand novels, and moral edification.”⁵¹ In the West, love has been put into a “schema” in which it has been given a fundamental determination. “If it were necessary to take the risk of grasping this schema in a formula, one might try this: love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching completion...Philosophy always thinks love as an accomplishment, arriving at a final and definitive completion.”⁵² This is not at all to say that in the West there is no moment of excess in love, that is, a moment of extremity or passing beyond the self. Western discourses on love, philosophy, theology, poetry, literature, are saturated with such extremity. And yet, for Nancy, there is an inevitable moment, even if entirely implicit, in which such extremity is turned into the dialectical production of identity, in which the movement of love is turned, *impatiently*, by virtue of the impatience of desire, into the becoming of a *subject*, the production of identity in and through difference. Again, Hegel is the one in the West who thinks this most explicitly, but this dialectic is everywhere for Nancy, “from

⁵⁰ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 249.

⁵¹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 267.

⁵² Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 249.

the Grand Rhetoricians to Baudelaire, from the troubadours to Wagner or Strauss, from Saint John of the Cross to Strindberg, and moving through Racine or Kleist, Marivaux or Maturin, Monteverdi or Freud.”⁵³

Nancy’s aim is not, nor is Kierkegaard’s, simply to step outside of this dialectic. As if one could! It is the very air we breathe in the West. The aim, as Nancy puts it, is to perform a “repetition”⁵⁴ of the dialectic in order to expose it from within to an outside that it cannot gather back into itself. This is, of course, a Kierkegaardian move, even down to the name Nancy gives it, *repetition*. Kierkegaard’s whole authorship is a repetition of the Western dialectic of love. Beginning with Socrates and moving through multiple figures of love—the seducer of *Either/Or*, Cordelia, Don Juan, Judge Wilhelm, the young man in *Repetition*, Nicolaus Notebene of *Prefaces*, Abraham, Anna, and of course, Jesus—Kierkegaard works to set the dialectic in motion, to get its heart pounding, its palms sweaty, its engine puffing and roaring, but not so that the train can reach its destination, but in order *to run the train off a cliff*, as in the climactic scene of *Back to the Future III*, itself a narrative of repeating time forward. But, of course, even *Back to the Future III* succumbs finally to the power of the dialectic. It performs a synthesis in which “the future” is wholly determined by the ideal of Western, romantic love safely confined to the nuclear family. Perhaps a better movie here would be *Snowpiercer*, which much more radically runs the train off a cliff in order to expose the dialectic of the inside—quite literally the master/slave dialectic!—to an un-masterable outside in which the white, Western nuclear family has been annihilated. Kierkegaard’s “attack on Christendom” was something like an attempt to storm the front of the train in order to derail it.

⁵³ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 251.

⁵⁴ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 257.

Of course, one could get stuck here in an idealization or romanticization of the outside, an idealization that would simply confirm the longing for identity. Even annihilation can become an identity, a place to plant one's flag. As Foucault puts it, "We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us."⁵⁵ Hegel is prepared to turn even the mutilated Jesus on the cross of Golgotha into the confirmation of identity. Such is the work of his "speculative Good Friday." It is important, I think, not to underestimate the way in which even our apocalyptic and "radical" longings are perhaps inescapably haunted by Hegel's ghost, by the impatient desire to produce an identity in and through negativity.

The work of breaking open the dialectic or schema in which love has been placed cannot at heart be a loud, boisterous, pompous work, even if shouting and laughter and perhaps even violence have their place. These extremities might be thought of as the work of "resignation" or "being-ready," a breaking away that at best is a setting up for a breaking through, although there can be no calculation here. At its heart, the breaking through is much more tender and intimate, absolutely tender and intimate, a work of love, the work of the heart, the work of touching that most tender and fragile of openings which only as such—tender, fragile, trembling without guarantee—escapes the dialectic. Nancy writes:

That which has the power of the dialectic is not a heart, but a subject. Perhaps one could find a heart in the subject. But this heart (if there is one) designates the place where the dialectical power is suspended (or perhaps shattered). The heart does not sublimate contradictions, since in a general sense, it does not live under the regime of contradiction—contrary to what poetry (or perhaps only its philosophical reading?) might allow us to believe. The heart lives—that is to say, it beats—under the regime of exposition.

If the dialectic is the process of that which must appropriate its own becoming in order to be, exposition, on the other hand, is the condition of that whose essence or destination consists in being presented: given over, offered to the outside, to others, and

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* and *The Discourse on Language*. trans. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 235.

even to the self...[The self] is not completed by this process, it “incompletes itself” to the outside; it is presented, offered to something that is not it nor its proper becoming.⁵⁶

And further:

The heart exposes the subject. It does not deny it, it does not surpass it, it is not sublated or sublimated in it; the heart exposes the subject to everything that is not its dialectic and its mastery as a subject. Thus, the heart can beat at the heart of the subject, it can even beat in a movement similar to that of the dialectic, but it does not confuse itself with that.⁵⁷

The heart, to borrow Kierkegaard’s language, is the infinite qualitative difference at the heart of the subject, a non-recuperable difference that leaves the subject exposed to what will not ground an identity, not even an identity established across difference. Nancy therefore denies that the heart is to be equated with desire. “Desire is not love.”⁵⁸ Desire is the engine of subjectivization, the power that drives the becoming of the subject, its self-mediation through an object. As such, desire is always caught up in one or another movement toward mastery, what Kierkegaard would call “sin.” Love, however, exposes desire. The heart is the exposition of desire, the exposure of desire to an outside before which it no longer desires itself as movement toward identity, but only as an opening.

The heart, therefore, is always a “broken heart,”⁵⁹ for Nancy, a heart in which desire is broken open with what Kierkegaard calls *Sorg*, longing. “In the broken heart, desire itself is broken.”⁶⁰ Being is a broken heart, a break, the infinite repetition of a break, each time infinitely singular, infinitely intimate, infinitely finite, infinitely fragile, infinitely exposed. “The love break simply means this: that I can no longer, whatever presence to myself I may maintain or that sustains me, pro-pose myself to myself (nor im-pose myself on another) without remains,

⁵⁶ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 252-3.

⁵⁷ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 254.

⁵⁸ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 263.

⁵⁹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 263.

⁶⁰ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 263.

without something of me *remaining*, outside of me.”⁶¹ Love is the undoing and the unknowing of oneself, a splitting open, “a blade thrust in me, and that I do not rejoin, because it disjoins me (it does not wound, properly speaking: it is something else, foreign to a certain dramatics of love).”⁶² Love is the breaking out of difference within the self and therefore between the self and an other. Such difference “is sexual, and it is not: it cuts across the sexes with another difference...that does not abolish them, but displaces their identities. Whatever my love is, it cuts across my identity, my sexual property, that objectification by which I am a masculine or feminine subject.”⁶³ The heart, one might say, is always queer.

It is not, however, that the heart, or being, is a whole that awaits or undergoes breaking.

This would be the logic of the dialectic. For Nancy:

The heart does not exist before the break. But it is the break itself that makes the heart. The heart is not an organ, and neither is it a faculty. It is: that I is broken and traversed by the other where its presence is most intimate and its life most open. The beating heart—rhythm of the partition of being, syncope of the sharing of singularity—cuts across presence, life, consciousness.⁶⁴

It is here where the distinctiveness of Nancy’s ontology emerges, summarizable as the “syncope of the sharing of singularity.” “Syncope” carries multiple senses, primary among them being the abbreviation of a word by removing a syllable, sound, or letter from the middle of the word, as well as a sudden loss of consciousness due to a drop in blood pressure. In both senses a break occurs. In the first, a word is broken as it is spoken or written. In the second, a gap occurs in the pressure that the heart is supplying to the body. But in the case of the heart (and undoubtedly language too), each beat always in some sense involves a syncope. There is always that instant *prior* to every beat, the *break* in-between each beat, in which the heart, as it were, stops, for an

⁶¹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 261.

⁶² Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 261.

⁶³ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 266.

⁶⁴ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 263.

instant, as the possibility of its repetition into a new beat. This syncope, this break, this moment of possibility that as such is *nothing*, this utter vulnerability of the heart as it waits in suspense, is what makes every beat the *coming into* existence of the heart, its *birth*, every beat a *miracle*, a singular instant of existence. The syncope of the heart is the heart's exposure and exposition, the nothin-ing at its heart that is the be-ing of the heart, its breaking, its beating.

Being, for Nancy, is the infinite repetition of that gap, that nothing, that originary break that is always the breaking out of singularity and the space(ing) of its sharing. Being is what allows simultaneously absolute singularity and absolute sharing. Being is always only a *being-with*, a *touching* that is not an absorption into any generality but rather the infinite confirmation of singularity, the breaking out of the infinitely finite distance between each self, the infinitely finite distance between each instant of existence, a distance that is traversed, but never completed, only in love. Being is the distance and "transparency"⁶⁵ of an infinite beginning.⁶⁶ Nancy writes elsewhere, "Issuing forth out of nothing, *created*, that is, not produced, not formed, not constructed, but the alternation and spasm of the *nihil*, the world is the explosion and expansion of an exposition (which we may call 'truth' or 'sense')...The world is a strangeness that is preceded by no familiarity."⁶⁷ The syncope of being is the spasm of the *nihil* from which the world explodes with utter strangeness, with no ideal template or schema, with no familiarity to which it is destined to return or recollect, with nothing at its heart but the beating of the heart, each time strange, each time new.

⁶⁵ Nancy, "Shattered Love," 261.

⁶⁶ cf. WL, 248: "Christianity's hope is eternity, and therefore there are light and shadow, beauty and truth, and above all the distance of transparency in its diagram of existence."

⁶⁷ Nancy, "Strange Foreign Bodies," in *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 85.

It is with this thought of the irreducible strangeness or singularity of being that Nancy goes on to distinguish himself from Levinas in “Shattered Love.” Nancy finds in Levinas, “in a rather classical manner,” the re-inscription of love into a “teleology.”⁶⁸ He writes, “This teleology proceeds from the first given of his thought, ‘the epiphany of the face’: love is the movement stressed by this epiphany, a movement that transcends it in order to reach, beyond the face, beyond vision and the ‘you,’ the ‘hidden—and never hidden enough—absolutely ungraspable.’ ... Love thus retains at least certain traits of a dialectical moment.”⁶⁹ Levinas opposes and “pre-poses” the face “‘to the unveiling of Being in general,’ a Heideggerian theme in which he sees ‘the absolute indetermination of the *there is*—of an existing without existents—incessant negation, infinite limitation,’ ‘anarchic.’”⁷⁰ Nancy’s critique is the following:

I can be in solidarity with Levinas’s distaste for certain accents, shall we say, of dereliction in Heidegger’s discourse. But in the *es gibt* (“it gives [itself]”) of Being, one can see everything except “generality.” *There is* the “each time,” an-archic in fact..., of an existing, singular occurrence. *There is no* existing without existents, and *there is no* “existing” by itself, no concept—it does not *give itself*—but there is always being, precise and hard, the theft of generality. Being is at stake here, it is in shatters, offered dazzling, multiplied, shrill and singular, hard and cut across: its being is there... And the crossing—the coming-and-going, the comings-and-goings of love—is constitutive of the occurrence. This takes place before the face and signification. Or rather, this takes place on another level: *at the heart* of being.⁷¹

The critique here is that Levinas allows the face to stand out from the generality of being only in order to turn the face into an occasion to *recollect* (my word) what is beyond being, namely, an ethical obligation and demand that comes from an infinite height. The problem here is the affirmation of the generality of being, a generic *there is*, an existing without existents, against which the face is opposed. This sets up a dialectic in which the beyond-being of ethical demand

⁶⁸ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 270.

⁶⁹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 270.

⁷⁰ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 270.

⁷¹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 270.

becomes something like its sublation, even if quite differently than a strictly Hegelian sublation. The relation between self and other is one in which the self is held is “hostage” by the other. The other is not, as in Kierkegaard, the “other you,” an absolute and singular equal, but the site of an infinite, *general* demand from on high. Nancy, for his part, wants to deny absolutely that there is any generality of being, any existing without existents. Being is always only the occurrence of singular existents, shattered, dazzling, multiplied, shrill and hard. And as he will go on to develop in other works, being is always only the occurrence of singular *bodies*, the movements of their touching, folding, and intertwining.

It is here in Nancy’s ontological refusal of generality that I hear an echo, a repetition forward, perhaps, of Kierkegaard, one that might allow one to glimpse an ontology in Kierkegaard, his own *ontological* refusal of generality. “Shattered Love” ends with a passage that resounds with Kierkegaardian echoes:

What appears in this light, at once excessive and impeccable, what is offered like a belly, like a kissed mouth, is the singular being insofar as it is this “self” that is neither a subject nor an individual nor a communal being, but *that*—she or he—which cuts across, that which arrives and departs... What is offered through the singular being—through you or me, across this relation that is only cut across—is the singularity of being, which is to say this: that being itself, “being” taken absolutely, is absolutely singular (thus it would be that which remains “self” when nothing comes back to the self).⁷²

Being is only ever the arrival and departure, the arrival of the departure, the crossing, of “*that* one,” Kierkegaard’s *hiin Enkelte*. Both Nancy and Kierkegaard affirm the absoluteness of *that* one, *that* self, *that* existent. There is no existence as such. Kierkegaard writes, “abstractions simply do not exist for God; for God in Christ there live only single individuals...God has no concept. God does not avail himself of an abridgment; he comprehends actuality itself, all its particulars; for him the single individual does not lie beneath the concept.”⁷³ As infinite

⁷² Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

⁷³ SUD, 121.

reduplication, God has no *general* relation to existence. “There is really only one quality—singularity. Everything revolves around this.”⁷⁴ The absolute is the absolute theft of generality. God is the always singular break at the heart of existence, its repetition, its beating, the birth of each self, each instant of existence, as utterly strange and new. And therefore “every self certainly is angular, but that only means that it is to be ground into shape, not that it is to be ground down smooth.”⁷⁵ The self is always, each time, a strangeness that is preceded by no familiarity. The vocation of the self, its *divine* vocation, is to let itself be strange—shrill and hard and angular in its singularity, not ground down smooth into any general shape. If it is not to mutilate itself in despair, the self must—this is the “law” of love—absolutely affirm and become its singularity, the break at the heart of its being, the break that is the heart of being, its shattered love. Such love, the abandon in which I am given over to myself, never ascends beyond “you,” beyond the singular other to whom I am given as a gift of love. God is the impossibility of an ascent beyond “you,” beyond “I love you.” God is the very gift of that “other you,” that neighbor, that one I touch as she passes by.

This is to receive the gift of “an absolute *self*,” as Nancy puts it, a self whose being “emerges in outbursts of joy. One could say: being joys.”⁷⁶ Such joy is always a shared joy, a touching and being touched by the presence of the other. “The self that joys joys of its presence in *the presence of the other*. He, she, is only the presence of the reception of the other presence... To joy, joy itself, it to receive the burst of a singular being.”⁷⁷ This not in anyway to lose oneself in or gain oneself from the other. “Love is faithful only to itself,”⁷⁸ a reduplication in

⁷⁴ JP, 1986.

⁷⁵ SUD, 33.

⁷⁶ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

⁷⁷ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 272-3.

⁷⁸ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 265.

itself. To love is to *dance* with the other, with abandon. “It is *by oneself* also that he, she who joys is bedazzled. It is in himself thus that he is delighted. But he does not belong to himself, and he does not come back to himself: he is shared, like the joy he shares.”⁷⁹ Such joy is the joy of the break, the nothing at the heart of being, the nothing that *is* being, its beating, its joying. As Kierkegaard puts it, “If, however, a person knew how to make himself truly what he truly is—nothing—knew how to set the seal of patience on what he had understood—ah, then his life, whether he is the greatest or the lowliest, would even today be a joyful surprise.”⁸⁰ The heart of existence is the joyful surprise that I am given over again, always again, to the work of love. And “the one who loves,” writes Kierkegaard, “discovers nothing,”⁸¹ a joyous abandon.

⁷⁹ Nancy, “Shattered Love,” 273.

⁸⁰ EUD, 226.

⁸¹ WL, 287.

CONCLUSION: BEGINNING AGAIN

----So how are you going to conclude your dissertation?

----Oh I refuse to conclude.

----What? You refuse to conclude your dissertation?

----Yes, I refuse.

----Why? You are so close to getting the Ph.D. and being a doctor. One little conclusion and you are there!

----I refuse.

----Why?

----I do not want to be the kind of doctor who sedates the fever and furor of discourse, who lulls it to sleep with a conclusion.

----But don't you need to state directly, objectively, properly, what it is that you have achieved and accomplished in the dissertation?

----If anything, this dissertation has been a long prayer that I might be delivered from the horizon of accomplishment.

----So if you are not going to conclude the dissertation, what are you going to do?

----I am going to reduplicate it.

----You're gonna do what?

----Reduplicate. Re-du-pli-cate. Repeat it. Give it another go.

----You're going to repeat the dissertation?

----Yes.

----The whole dissertation?

----Yes.

----You're going to repeat the *whole* dissertation?

----Yes.

----You're going to write the whole thing again?

----Sort of.

----Please explain!

----I am going to go back through the whole thing and give it a new form, a reduplicated form.

----Ok....

----Like Eckhart says in a sermon of his I quoted: "Your light must be utterly extinguished and go out of itself altogether, then God can shine in with his light, bringing back with him everything you forsook and a thousandfold more, besides the new form containing it all."

----Sounds spooky.

----And like Johannes Climacus says at the beginning of his book on doubt: "I...by means of the form seek to counteract the detestable untruth that characterizes recent philosophy."

----So what is this new form that you are going to give your dissertation?

----One that gets it off itself.

----Sounds a bit wild.

----Exactly.

PASSION FOR NOTHING: KIERKEGAARD'S APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

By

Peter Kline

Dissertation

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Religion

May, 2016

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Professor William Franke

Professor Ellen Armour

Professor Laurel Schneider

Professor David Wood

ATTUNEMENT



Peter Kline. Untitled. 24" x 36" acrylic on canvas. 2015.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: NOTHING IS BETTER THAN SOMETHING



Peter Kline. Untitled. 15" x 20" acrylic and charcoal on illustration board. 2015.

CHAPTER II

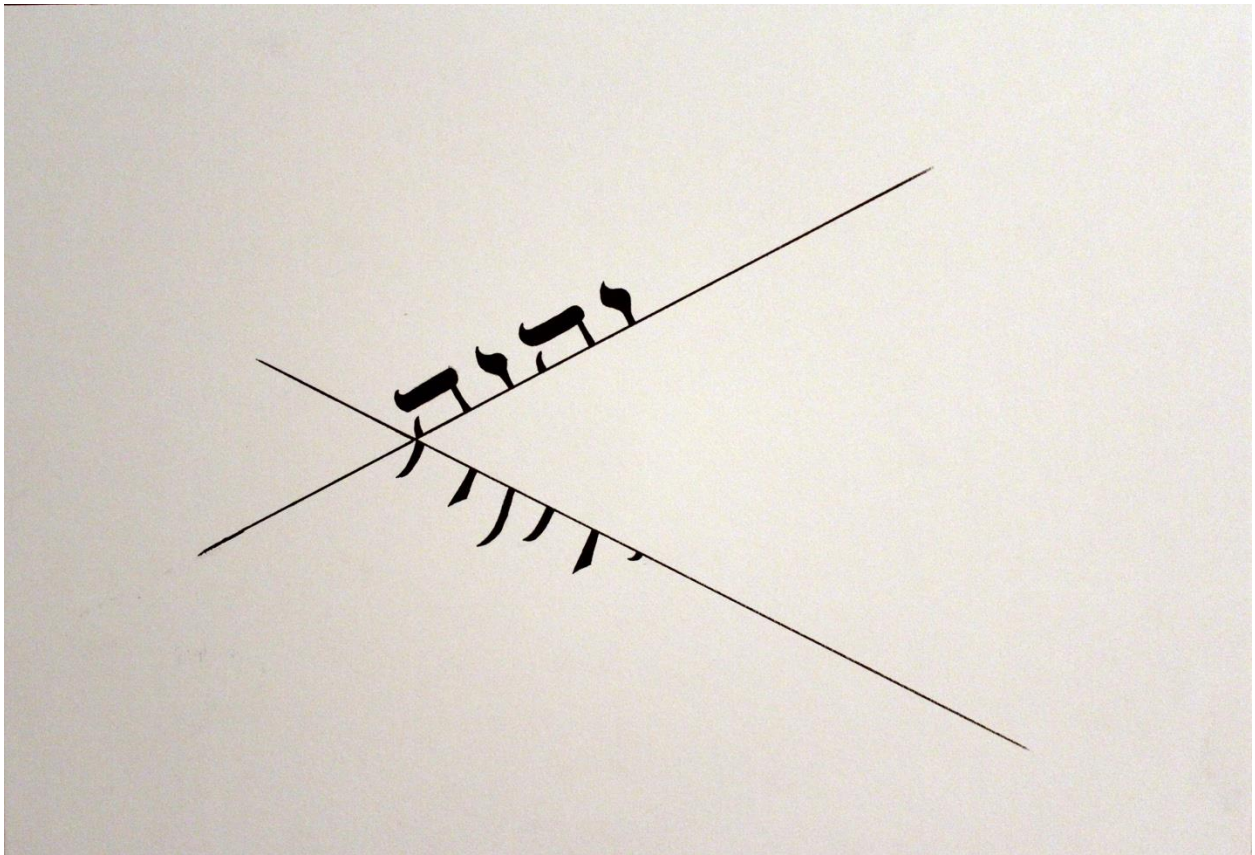
INDIRECT COMMUNICATION: WRITING NOTHING



Peter Kline. Untitled. 36" x 48" acrylic on wood panel. 2015.

CHAPTER III

INFINITE REDUPLICATION: KIERKEGAARD'S NEGATIVE CONCEPT OF GOD



Peter Kline. Untitled. 12" x 16" ink on illustration board. 2016.

CHAPTER IV

FAITH: ACTION TO EXCESS



Peter Kline. Untitled. 44" x 44" acrylic and charcoal on bed sheet. 2015.

CHAPTER V

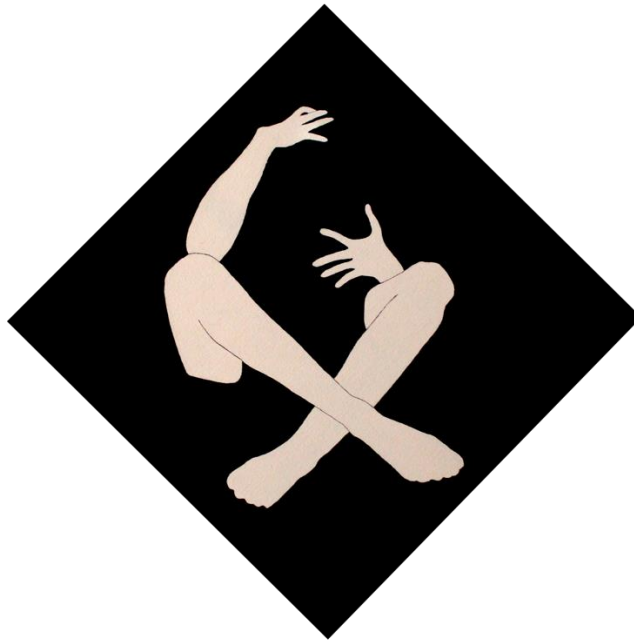
HOPE: KEEPING TIME ABSURDLY OPEN



Peter Kline. Untitled. 12" x 16" acrylic and colored charcoal on canvas. 2014.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE: HOLDING NOTHING IN COMMON



Peter Kline. Untitled. 28" x 28" (x2) acrylic and charcoal on canvas. 2016.

CONCLUSION: BEGINNING AGAIN



Peter Kline. Untitled. 24" x 24" acrylic on wood panel. 2015.

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