

TONGUE-TIES: AUTO-AFFECTION IN THE MOUTHS OF HEGEL AND DERRIDA

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Tongue-tied, I find myself forever affected by the mouths of G.W.F. Hegel and Jacques Derrida, mesmerized by the words that spill and resonate across the pages of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and *Philosophy of Right*, to *Glas*, now *Clang* and *Life-Death*. With my tongue, I sound out the depths of their respective philosophies, feeling their cultures cultivate the raised fungiform of my papillae, allowing the form of their thoughts to languish epiglottally above the windpipe, before luxating their semantic resonances with the vibration of dissonant vocal cords. Between Hegel and Derrida, I find mouths that speak to an undying commitment that I savour, a desire to loosen or how sex and the body can be read or felt in art, philosophy and literature. While many would not necessarily approach the formidable edifice of Hegelianism with the question of sex in mind, there is no dispute regarding the fact that the very movement of the Hegelian dialectic is profoundly sexual in nature.

Sex, for Hegel, is fundamentally an issue of rationality, as corporeal and intellectual differences encountered within the family unit, the social arrangement he privileges in *Philosophy of Right*, as the structure that must sublimate such differences into the *one* sex of society, which he argues, 'is therefore spirituality.'¹ Sexes, in Hegelianism, are always reduced to one sex by the unity of marriage as a social formation that privileges not only male power, authority and sexuality, but man's ability to affect himself, to stroke, caress and filiate himself with the logic that he has cultivated from within. Man's ability to relate to himself, a capacity that Hegel explicitly denies of women, is an essential moment in the shaping of human spirit, in which the relation shared between father and son, the affective filiation of one man speaking to another, enables

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206.

man to know himself through self-conscious unity with his offspring.² Man conceives himself by producing a son, a living being that allows him to relate to himself as his own resource, a form of internal and external mediation which Hegel likens to the figure of a simple seed, a seed we will return to momentarily.³

So, when I say that this paper is an attempt to loosen the rationalisation of sex via the vocal cords, I mean to suggest that the problem lies with Hegel's appropriation of human speech as the privileged site for the auto-affection of the masculine subject, and the vehicle for hierarchisation of sex through the synthesis of contradictory ideas. What follow, then, is my attempt to loosen Hegel's rationalisation of sex via Derrida and the attention the latter gives in *Glas* to the differences that are secreted by the body in advance of sublation, as an acknowledgement of the auto-affection or self-touching that ripples throughout the body by way of the vocal cords prior to vocalisation, a self-caressing or self-affecting of difference that no dialectical arrangement can arguably apprehend as such.

Pure auto-affection, Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena*, is the operation of hearing-oneself-speak which, in turn, reduces the inward surface of one's own body.⁴ It is the unmediated and "pure" experience of self-affirmation, the possibility of subjectivity, according to Derrida, that is established through the proximity of mouth and ear, and the presence that is cultivate with the self-affective touch or stroke of the human voice. Auto-affection, according to Derrida, is a form of time that does not borrow from outside of itself, that does not take from the world outside any substance of expression that is foreign to its own spontaneity.⁵ It is the element of ideality or universality in which the internal mediation of disparate ideas are pacified by the self-affective lapping of the rational mind with the tongue that vocalises and soothes. Thus, consciousness, Derrida writes, is the experience of pure auto-affection, the self-affirmation and proclamation of human presence through the experience of hearing-oneself-speak as such.⁶

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 199.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Clang*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 37.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 79.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 20.

⁶ *Ibid*, 98.

While Hegel's thesis on self-conscious certainty and sociality of spirit does not reflect a similar verbiage or articulation of the human voice as raised by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, Hegel's privileging of man's ability to self-relate, a feature he likens to the motif or concept of the seed in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, bears striking resemblances to Derrida's critique of auto-affection, which he ultimately suggests in *Of Grammatology*, is none other than the hetero-affection of the subject via discourse.⁷ As Hegel suggests in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the manifestation of the seed or semen in nature, as the moment for us in which the question of sex engages with rationality, becomes the phenomenal substance *par excellence* for the sublation of life itself.⁸ *Der Same* or *Samen* (the German for "seed", "semen", "sperm" or "grain") in Hegelian logic epitomises the immediate, simple, and unreflective progress of spirit. 'As a spirit,' Hegel writes, 'man does not have an immediate existence but is essentially turned in upon himself.'⁹ Since 'he' possesses an ideal knowledge of reality, 'man' ceases to be merely a natural being that is subservient to animal impulses or intuitions, and instead acts in accordance with ends and determines himself in the light of a general principle. Plants begin as seeds, Hegel tells us, but the seed, much like the spirit, is also the product of the plant's entire life, for it develops only in order to produce the seed; in other words, the seed does not go outside itself, for Hegel, nor does not form a relation with the outside and its absolute other or opposite.¹⁰ Rather, the division between seed and plant, like son and father, is not absolute. Both become their own products of self-affection, the seed becomes the plant which becomes the seed again, and the man becomes his own son, the son of his work from his own seed.

Man conceives himself by producing a son, a living being that allows him to relate to himself as his own resource.¹¹ This relationship of father and son, glued together by the substantive feeling of familial love, enables man to 'know himself' implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another and of the other with him, through the filiation of love that is shared between father and son in order to produce the same movement or shape of self-conscious certainty. What I am trying to suggest here, in referring to Hegel's motif of the seed as a way of explaining the shape of spirit as it develops through the filiation of father and son, is that auto-affection is more than just the self-touching that takes place during the moment of hearing-oneself-speak,

⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 155.

⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 82; Derrida, *Clang*, 35.

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 50.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Clang*, 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

it is also the self-touching that takes place within the social formation of the family, in which the voice of the master of the household becomes the seed that germinates all forms of self-conscious certainty, the pure experience of internal mediation which is in fact always a mediation through the voice of the father on high.

For Derrida, the problem remains as to how we can circumvent the absolute philosophical position of the father in Hegelian logic and the prevailing assumption that the human voice spontaneously facilitates the auto-affection of the subject. This desire to reverse the autoinsemination of the father's authority as it pertains to the human voice is born out in Derrida's 1974 publication *Glas*, a work that, at its heart, aims to unstick the surety of presence that is cultivated in the ability to hear-oneself-speak. *Glas*, in its unconventional stylistic format, is an arrangement of two columns, the pedagogical philosophy of Hegel on the left and the erotic poeticism of Genet on the right, a coupling forged by Derrida himself to incite an outrageous complication of the dialectical method and the act of reading itself, which Geoffrey Bennington and David Wills describe in their translation of *Glas* as 'the littered space of species extinction, decay, disappearance and death.'¹²

If, as Derrida argues in *Dissemination*, Hegel's sublation is an idealised system that automatically reduces the differences between contradictions to a single, homogenous model of logic (which again refers to Hegel's metaphor of the seed or semen), then the irregular layout of *Glas* is an exercise in demonstrating 'what remains' anterior and exterior to this process: of the differences that 'fall away' as the remainders or excrement of Hegel's philosophical essentiality.¹³ This challenge to the seed or sperm of Hegelian dialectics, however, is not so straightforward. Derrida recognises the strength and resilience of Hegelian logic in philosophy, it's almost invincible and uncompromising status and, perhaps crucially for Derrida, the way that the dialectical method anticipates and incorporates the very notion of a possible counterargument in advance of it being posed.¹⁴

It is for this reason in particular that *Glas* should not be considered a direct refutation of sublation, as doing so would cause it to fall victim to the same method it contests. If Hegel

¹² Jeffrey Bennington and David Wills, Translator's Preface to *Clang*, by Jacques Derrida (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), xi

¹³ Derrida, "Outwork," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.

¹⁴ Bennington and Wills, Translator's Preface to *Clang*, xii.

champions sublation as a pure porousness which continually unfolds the internal differences of a synthesized concept, then Derrida's *Glas* should be read as a poetic lubrication of difference rather than any sort of philosophical submersion. Between both columns, words secrete into the margins of the text, gliding across blank spaces before sticking loosely to unrelated sentences and contexts only to then dissolve back once again. Unlike the seeds or sperm of Hegel which would produce a plant or offspring that refers back to itself as its own resource (its origin as a flower or father), the experience of reading *Glas* is a much more slippery, lubricious, and elusive affair. From the first page, meaning escapes the masterful hold of language itself; every word, it would seem, represents a flagrant disregard for linear argumentation, citational standards and traditional academic rigor. Instead, the formulation of *Glas* exposes language to the undecidability of wordplay, puns, aural resonances, and textual interruptions, where the authority behind any system of meaning is placed under scrutiny.¹⁵

Glas, in this sense, can be read as a sexual poetics where the differences between words, rather than becoming subsumed by sublation, are in fact treated to the experience of an excretion, of oozing out of the body of a text as hybrid, flotsam or dead bits of meanings left behind by the vigour of two columns rubbing together. Derrida's decision in choosing *Glas* as the title for the final work is twofold. First, the French *glas* refers to the event of a bell announcing an imminent death or funeral procession, registered as a clang, knell, peal, toll, or chime. Appearing on the front cover in modest typeset, the title *Glas* sounds a warning to perspective readers of an inevitable violence that language is about to incur across all of its inner pages.

Between these two towering columns of text, Derrida writes in the right-hand 'Genet', is a blank space that would fit a bell.¹⁶ Swinging back and forth from Hegel to Genet, the eyes of the reader take up a pendulous motion, slowly building to the inevitable collision of disparate ideas which threaten to disorientate the logical progression of the rational mind. This swinging motion of reading, for Derrida, is not an action or logical operation of negation, of negating an idea in the hopes that a higher understanding might suddenly strike. Instead, it is Derrida's attempt to take a proverbial hammer to Hegelian philosophy: to batter it around the ears; confound it; deafen it; deaden it; luxate it from the safety of its absolute idealism; separate it

¹⁵ Jessica Marian, "Styling against absolute knowledge in Derrida's *Glas*" *Parrhesia* 24 (2015): 217.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 228.

from itself; in order to describe and decri its comprehensive, rigorous structure.¹⁷ Between the two, the eyes of the reader becomes the clapper of a bell that swings and collides with the nonsensical body of a text, only to resonate throughout the logical mind as a death knell of language itself.

The second reason for Derrida's choice in *Glas* as a title resides in its subversive 'gl effect:' the phonemic stress of a glottal stop, a type of consonant sound that is produced during speech by the closing of the vocal cords before they are quickly reopened, wherein the air of the lungs is released with force. As Derrida himself explains during a rare aside where he confirms both the decision and intention behind the chosen title:

'What I am trying to write – *gl* – is not just any structure whatsoever, a system of the signifier or the signified, a thesis or a novel, a poem, a law, a desire or a machine, but what passes, more or less well, through the rhythmic stricture of an annulus.'¹⁸

The *gl* of *Glas* itself is a glottal action, of closing off the circulation of resonances that calls to mind the sound of a gagging or retching. Mercilessly throttling the throat, *gl* mimics the sound of strangulation when it is performed or uttered, exposing the speaking subject to the thrill or fear of a gentle choking in the moment of vocalisation.¹⁹ It can be heard as an audible gurgling that echoes from down below, as if someone was gargling or suffocating on the intrusive arrival or extruded presentation of wet saliva, sperm, or milk. *Gl* itself then is not a word but a *Klang*; what Derrida describes as an impression or feeling that is registered by the body as a vibration that starts up without warning and fades away before any rational determination or meaning can be attributed to its passing.²⁰

The *gl* of *Glas* is not a property of the tongue or throat; it does not belong to speech as such. Rather, it is an event, an encounter between muscle, skin, flesh, fluid and mucus, that hoists the tongue before the procedural work of sublating sound into meaning.²¹ In other words, *gl* is the

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Tympan" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xiii.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Glas*, 109.

¹⁹ J. Hillis Miller, "On First Looking into Derrida's *Glas*," *Paragraph* 39, no. 2 (2016): 132.

²⁰ Derrida, *Clang*, 16.

²¹ Derrida, *Glas*, 236.

sound of a gagging on the seed or sperm of Hegel's logic, where the mouthpiece that would provide the concept with meaning chokes on what remains anterior and exterior to the dialectical method: the living conditions that would cause language itself to be spoken or stopped in the first instance. Between the flaps of mucosal tissue in the throat, words are lubricated, glued, melted, spewed, but always mediated by the threat of meaning being suffocated by the very operation on which it relies.

'*Gl*,' Derrida writes in the Genet column, 'tears the "body," "sex," "voice" and "writing" from the logic of consciousness and representation' that guides Hegelian dialectics. Gargling on the wet, thin layer of laryngeal mucus which maintains the vocal cords as a source of speech production, *gl* performs an 'angular slash of the opposition' in the throat, a 'death-effect' that remarks the progressive and teleological work of sublation from within itself.²² This inner threat to dialectical synthesis, this *gl* effect that obstructs the airway in order to produce a consonant sound, is not an unfolding of internal differences or becoming of ideas that results in the production of truth. Instead, *gl* manifests in advance of speech as an unconscious strangulation or choking which exposes language, to borrow from Derrida elsewhere in *The Gift of Death*, to a frightful mystery, an indiscernible yet irrepressible *secret* that causes the speaking subject to physically tremble.²³

In the moment before vocalisation, prior to the production of an idea or thesis that would enter into the back-and-forth rationalisation of the dialectical method, difference is *secreted* by the trembling of mucosal tissue. In a literal sense, it is secreted as a gliding movement of the tongue and wet vibration of the vocal cords, producing an agglutination of sounds and meanings that flow out of the mouth and into language. In a poetic sense, it is also secreted; exuded as a resonance or feeling that resists the finality of signification and dialectical synthesis; a stealthy, clandestine, or secretive force that causes the body to tremble in anticipation of the event.

In the very instance that air is forced from the lungs following the fleeting suffocation of a glottal stop, difference ripples from within prior to signification, owing to the mechanical vibration of the vocal cords themselves, as a fleshly operation that remains unfathomable to the inner workings of the conscious mind. The glottal action of '*gl*,' in other words, secretes

²² Derrida, *Glas*, 235.

²³ Jacques Derrida, "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)," in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53.

the body in advance of sublation and its self-engendering of internal contradictions, concealed as what remains external to the comprehensive and logically rigorous structure of Hegel's absolute idealism. In other words, the *gl* of *Glas* is the remainder of that which cannot be summed up by sublation, the differences that resists the procedural movements of Hegelian logic and its desire to gather, preserve and homogenize.

By attending to the phenomena of the glottal stop during speech in *Glas*, Derrida is thus suggesting that auto-affection, that form of self-relation so precious to Hegel, is inherently an event where the body encounters the death of language itself. In our mouths, there is always a meeting of foreign tongues, a wrestling of multiple mouthpieces that jostle together in the act of touching, translating and transforming ourselves and others, but which are always exposed to the violent interruption of death, decay and self-demolition. If I was to sound out one final thing in this mouth right now, it is the *gl* of *Glas* that frustrates the pure auto-affection of the father, who's tongue I find in my mouth so often, which I wrestle with lovingly, but also with menace.

Thank you.