

## Immediacy and Dissolution: Notes on the Languages of Moral Agency and Critical Discourse

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No Man can understand  
But He that hath endured  
The Dissolution—in Himself—  
That Man—be qualified

To qualify Despair  
To Those who failing new—  
Mistake Defeat for Death—Each time  
Till acclimated—to—

—Emily Dickinson, # 539

One of the most intricate and contested conceptual alliances that the period of romanticism and idealism has bequeathed contemporary theory is undoubtedly that between “immediacy” and “morality.” It appears to become an efficient cultural tenet during the latter part of the eighteenth century, such as in its grounding of Adam Smith’s paradigmatic “emotivist” concept of morality in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Achieving further momentum in the Neoplatonist and post-Enlightenment thought of Hemsterhuis, Hamann, Herder, and Schiller, the concept of “immediacy” eventually comes to assume a pivotal function in the

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philosophy of Kant and Fichte as well as in the poetic theories of Novalis, Schlegel, and Coleridge. Here it serves as the very “ground” for the discourses of epistemology and moral theory, that is, as an unmediated, principled, and self-conscious subjectivity that, by way of the correlative notion of “sympathy,” also project itself into political and social theory.<sup>1</sup> As such, needless to say, “immediacy” once again assumes a variety of costumes, appearing as the auto-affective play of the faculties in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, namely, as the “feeling” (*Gefühl*) that our reflective judgment recognizes as the condition of possibility for “knowledge in general”; or it appears as a postulate of self-production in Fichte, realized by an agency whose unconscious “act” (*Tathandlung*) generates the “feeling of its determinability” (*Bestimmbarkeit*) for what is an inevitably belated “reflection”; or, again, we encounter a morally charged *Gefühl* in the work of the quintessentially romantic Novalis (arguably Fichte’s most incisive reader); it is eventually recognized by reflection as a “formative drive” (*Formtrieb*).<sup>2</sup> However varied its inflection, “immediacy” functions as the condition of possibility for all knowledge, and thus as the capstone of the conceptual edifices of early nineteenth-century theory. Yet as the romantics also acknowledge, with Novalis once again appearing the most probing, “immediacy” as the condition of possibility for reflection is recuperable only in alienated form; hence, the archaeological project of reflexive determination can never entirely account for the “interest” or “motive” that causes theory to undertake such an archaeology of the subject’s “immediate” ground. “Feeling,” he remarks, “cannot feel itself. . . . It can only be observed in reflection—at which point the spirit of the feeling is lost.”<sup>3</sup> As an increasingly vertiginous or mesmerized encircling of the undecidable concept of “immediacy,” theory constitutes itself as the site of a conflict between an archaeological and a teleological, a formal and a social, kind of knowledge, with both meanings permeating the epistemic practice of *Bestimmung* (i.e., determination/destination).

Much critical theory over the last thirty-five years or so has sought to dismantle this notion, exposing its inherently tautological or, alternatively, foreign-determined quality and, in uncovering its contradictory or imaginary dimension, contesting the status of “immediacy” as the essential and knowable condition of possibility for knowledge.<sup>4</sup> We may especially think of Derrida’s critique of the early Husserl’s notion of self-presence, or of Lacan’s linguistic rewriting of Freud. More recently, however, theory has increasingly abandoned these relatively abstract forms of

reconstruction" in favor of contextually and historically attentive forms of critique. According to Alan Liu, this reorientation of deconstruction toward ideological critique and historicist modes of inquiry, as such inclined to consider the idea(l) of a "pure" theory as yet another *symptom* of ideological commitment rather than its cure, has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on the *formal-methodological* and (by implication) *oral propriety of cultural analysis*. In conscientiously disavowing any notion of totality, diligently abjuring any form of diachronic or synchronic generalization, and in duly espousing the credo of scholarly "detail" or highly limited, localized "fields" of inquiry, a new particularism of highly specialized theoretical discourses has emerged. What ties these discourses together is their latently moral sense of critical urgency, a "sense" that, to be sure, we can only arrive at counterintuitively. For on the surface, Theory appears little more than a vague title for a critical practice characterized by ever-increasing topical diversity and self-conscious conceptual discriminations, as well as by its ongoing dispersion and reassessment of "fields" and "approaches," by its vindication of overlooked or suppressed traditions, canons, and cultures, and by its scrupulous search for "ground-making" forms of critique whose restorative efforts unfold under the explicit theoretical caveat of a duly localized authority.<sup>5</sup>

In reviewing the varied though structurally cognate "channels" on which postmodern "high cultural criticisms" are currently broadcasting, Alan Liu has recently pointed to cultural critique's overriding interest in posing and reevaluating (albeit belatedly) the local mechanisms of "power" whose capacity to shape a given "culture" or "slice" of culture hinges on the exclusion of entire population-groups and/or on the often discriminate appropriation of specific material and economic interests. At the same time, in turn, the now "dominant" culture will obfuscate under the aegis of the *aesthetic*. Where the "immediacy" of its participants had deeply rendered their culture the correlate of *perception*, a postmodern critique conceives of culture as the effect of a contextually determined, socially aggressive *definition*. This inherently self-blinded, hence "immediate," constitutive efficiency of any culture is commonly referred to as its "ideology," and according to Jerome McGann, it is "a fortiori seen as a body of illusions."<sup>6</sup> Extending Liu's analysis, we may with some legitimacy remark on a pervasive, self-consciously belated, and thus principled insistence in current "high cultural criticism" to redeem past cultures from the restrictive and exclusionary economies that enabled historically and locally specific cultural meanings to constitute themselves and to

serve their (at the time unreflected) purpose.<sup>7</sup> As contemporary cultural criticisms reverse the valuation of "immediacy" and "culture," of subjective agency and its material, sociocultural effects, they appear to reinstate the originally Hegelian premise that all relations, whether immanent, semiotic, material, economic, psychological, etc., are susceptible of theoretical scrutiny precisely on account of their inherently duplicitous ("unconscious") structure, a structure that hinges precisely on the dialectic between the "immediacy" of cultural production and the necessarily belated, critical reflection capable of articulating the cost/benefit ratio that shapes and sustains cultural productivity. In situating their objects of inquiry within a matrix of immediacy/reflection, surface/depth, and ideology/critique, contemporary critiques build on a paradigm of Theory in which relations are by definition imbued with moral-evaluative significance.<sup>8</sup> *As cultural critique, that is, the ever more complex languages of contemporary theoretical critique have constituted and positioned themselves as the infrastructure of a postmodern, dis-individuated morality.*

What may thus far appear a strangely double-barreled focus on moral theory and cultural critique respectively, constitutes indeed a subject chosen at once deliberately and, as I hope to show, purposefully. For besides revealing how any notion of the "social" is born of the "classic" encounter between theory and praxis, the Hegelian and post-Hegelian conception of moral theory appears beset by a significant, twofold crisis. First, there is the crisis of legitimacy that affects the traditional concept of the moral subject, which can be thought alternatively as affective immediacy or as self-conscious intentionality or as social personality, depending on whether we follow an emotivist, decisionist, or pragmatist model of moral theory.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, we come to see—as early as in the work of Hegel—that the crisis of moral theory involves the recognition of a *general contingency of values* (regardless of whether they are overtly moral or not) *on their sustained discursive instantiation* or, as Derrida might put it, on their "iterability." In other words, the crisis of moral theory—which is encompassed by the question concerning how cultural values are defined and socially identified—is not one of possibility or impossibility but of its delimitation within a general spectrum of discursive practices continuously performed and reorganized by the multifaceted "discipline" of Theory.

Put differently, my argument here will be that Theory per se constitutes a metalanguage, whose principal motivation it is to redistribute and reconfigure particular, more or less stringently formalized conceptual

sets and subsets insofar as they are to function as the “dimension of assessment” (J. L. Austin) of whatever a particular individual or community thinks and addresses as the Real or “reality.” In actively soliciting our subscribership to a *particular* metalanguage, Theory reveals a motivation more or less independent of the all too conspicuous question concerning its ontological “truth-value,” an issue no longer thinkable or solvable as a *separate, pure, and autonomous* theoretical problem anyway. And precisely to the extent that it appears imbedded in a contingent set of historical, social, and discursive factors (empirical factors that effectively shape and determine the direction and rigor of its transcendent conceptualizations), the practice of Theory not only develops a set of technical rules and norms designed to govern any variety of sociohistorical inquiries but, in so doing, also exercises an inherently “moral” function in that it delimits valid/appropriate discursive practices in a given community and its institutional conception of acceptable, relevant, and/or purposeful context(s). In its metalingual distribution of cognitive authority and accountability, Theory qua practice prestructures (in the sense of a hermeneutic “prejudice” (*Vorhaben*) the idea of critique as inherently moral, well before particular critical “modes” or “approaches” will begin to “discern” the ethical tensions that inhere in and support discrete sociocultural phenomena. As Michael Oakeshott has remarked, morality cannot be restricted to a matter of momentous ethical choices made within a topically preindexed “field” of moral problems, a notion that, under the title “decisionism,” defines merely a particular local trend in current moral theory. Rather, when seen as a matter of positioning oneself in a continuum of complex and interlacing discourses,

moral conduct is agents related to one another in the acknowledgement of the authority of a practice composed of conditions which because of their generality attracts to itself the generic name, “practice”: morality, *mos*. A morality is the *ars artium* of conduct, the practice of all practices; the practice of agency without further specification.<sup>10</sup>

Deferring, for the time being, a more insistent questioning of Oakeshott’s conservative and ultimately precipitous identification of “moral conduct” with “the acknowledgement of the authority of a practice” (when, in fact, it might just as conceivably constitute itself as a persistent critical challenge to such an authority), we shall retain his overall crucial identification of morality as the “practice of agency.” Proceeding from the hypothesis that

morality begets its “subject” through a configuration of particulars and universals, and that, therefore, it cannot be restricted to a conscious and intentional individuality, we shall trace some historical and paradigmatic links between Hegel and contemporary ordinary-language and neopragmatist philosophy (in Austin and Oakeshott), links that identify the practice of Theory as both inherently discursive and, in virtue of its metalingual quality, as latently moral. Such a rethinking of the ratio of theory and discourse is not simply motivated by that ratio’s vitiating impact on the ontologically motivated (moral) idealisms of the early nineteenth century but should also caution us against an overly enthusiastic embracing of the various contemporary, eschatologically “motivated,” if strenuously localized, theoretical critiques of cultural production.

## I

In its effort at reconfiguring moral theories from Plato and Aristotle through Erasmus, Leibniz, Hume, Adam Smith, and Kant, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* devotes a significant and highly condensed chapter to redefining the question concerning the intelligibility of the social and the political as one of morality. In positing community and moral order as the semantic *effects* of private and “immediate” or expressive significations, grounded in and legitimated by a form of moral authorship, Theory as a metalanguage serves primarily the purpose of verifying and grounding the integrity and authority of this very *relation* between individual (moral) agency and social authority. To do so, Hegel realizes, requires a more rigorous reassessment of the authenticity, determinability, and communicability of Kant’s affective paradigm of morality, known as the “feeling of duty” (*Pflichtgefühl*). That is, the grounding of an authentic and “immediate” self-relation (i.e., a “moral self-consciousness”) conditions its efficiency for the determination of moral (i.e., social and cultural) relations, for which moral self-consciousness is to provide the essential nucleus.

As is well known, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* posits the speculative progression of a “natural consciousness” whose “reflexive determinations” of its own concept (*Begriff*) successively “cancel” [*aufheben*] its initially empirical positions, and thus “sublate” (*aufheben*) the discrete individuality of consciousness into the inclusive and trans-individual authority of “spirit” (*Geist*).<sup>11</sup> Consistent with its paradigmatic dialectic mediation of meaning

and truth (*Meinung, Wahrheit*), the *Phenomenology* redescrines morality as a dynamic and self-transforming structure of relations, rather than defining it as a transhistorical, principled, and quasi-substantial essence, meaning, or innate property within individual consciousness. Section C in part BB of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, entitled “Spirit that is certain of itself: Morality,” thus concentrates on the very tensions between what appears to be an initial moment of private conviction and the reflexive recognition of its incompatibility with social obligation. In short, we are offered a speculative analysis of the concept of duty.

Initially, Hegel comments, “self-consciousness knows duty to be the absolute essence. . . . However, as thus locked up within itself, moral self-consciousness is not yet posited as *consciousness*. The object is immediate knowledge, and being thus permeated purely by the self is *not* an object.”<sup>12</sup> In short, duty must mediate the apparent positivity of its own, immediate “conviction” and the strict negativity of the worldly and sensuous “otherness” by which it is opposed. Hence, “moral consciousness as the *simple knowing* and *willing* of pure duty is, in the doing of it, . . . brought into relation with the actuality of the complex case” (*PS*, 369; *PbG*, 429). A tension emerges between a consciousness characterized by a general and formal sense of morality (duty) and another consciousness informed by the situational and contextual exigencies of a specific situation: “Thus it is postulated that it is *another* consciousness which . . . contains the equally essential relation to ‘doing’, and to the necessity of the *specific* content: since for this other, duties mean specific duties, the content as such is equally essential as the form which makes the content a duty” (*PS*, 370; *PbG*, 430). For Hegel it is the “immediate” form of the spirit qua “conscience” that will reconcile the universality of duty as a postulate directed at all being with the situational pragmatics and particularity of “duties,” thereby mediating a discursive form and a social content. The need for such reconciliation is more than a merely technical, philosophical exigency, since the initial opposition comes down to one between the transcendental (Duty) and the empirical (duties), that is, a conflict between two ways (say, orthodox vs. pragmatic) of *meaning*; and, as Hegel is well aware, conflicts of meaning become, ultimately, always conflicts of value.

Hence, what Hegel now refers to as “this self of conscience” or a “*third* self” is also characterized as “moral self-consciousness having attained its truth” (*PS*, 384–85; *PbG*, 445–46). To specify that which authenticates and authorizes this “truth” of conscience, however, is to

perform a paradigmatic shift from the interiority of an individuated (self-)consciousness (irrespective of whether its content be duty as form or duties as content) to the distinctively modern and mediated concept of “personality.” As Hegel observes, “[T]he totality or actuality which shows itself to be the truth of the ethical world is the self of the person; its existence consists in its being acknowledged by others.” In other words, “conscience is the common element of the two self-consciousnesses, and this element is the substance in which the deed has an *enduring reality*, the moment of being *recognized* and *acknowledged* by others” (*PS*, 384, 388; *PbG*, 445, 450). Moral authority, that is, emerges at, indeed is constitutive of, the very intersection between theory and practice, transcendence and empiricity, cognition and ideology. In view of this inherently bilateral structure, which mandates that it be “recognized” as *moral* authority as well as “acknowledged” as moral *authority*, we must now determine how and to what extent morality will evolve as a discernible and phenomenal (i.e., cultural) moment by integrating its potentially opposed aspects within or, rather, as a discursive-linguistic practice.

With unfailing concentration Hegel thus points out how “here again, then, we see language as the existence of Spirit. Language is self-consciousness existing *for others*, self-consciousness which *as such* is immediately *present*, and as *this* self-consciousness is universal” (*PS*, 395; *PbG*, 458). When recognized as the very infrastructure for the construction and manifestation of moral authority, language must shoulder the burden of proving the truth and “sincerity” of the speaker’s collective and morally authoritative “spirit” for others. Whereas “moral consciousness” had presented itself as “still dumb, shut up with itself within its inner life,” Hegel now asserts that “language . . . emerges as the middle term, mediating between independent and acknowledged self-consciousnesses; and the *existent self* is immediately universal acknowledgment.” The social dimension of this inward paradigm of the “ethical spirit” emerges into full view with Hegel’s qualification of it as “law and simple command” (*PS*, 396; *PbG*, 458–59).<sup>13</sup> Thus, in keeping with Hegel’s anti-formalist dialectic of moral consciousness, language emerges as a more or less explicitly performative *praxis* rather than as a referential *form* (to retain an ultimately untenable distinction for the sake of argument here).<sup>14</sup> That is, rather than signifying or representing moral meanings, it instantiates or enacts social values *as* and *through* a more or less defined language. In short, it is the *visibly* enacted competence within *any* given discourse per se, and not merely the topical and referential emulation of

the putative conceptual stock of generic and traditional morality (e.g., conscience, good/evil, duty, etc.) that underwrites the morality of any verbal agent. As Hegel puts it,

[T]he content of the language of conscience is the *self that knows itself as essential being*. This alone is what it declares, and this declaration is the true actuality [*wahre Wirklichkeit*] of the act, and the validating [*das Gelten*] of the action. Consciousness declares its conviction; it is in this conviction alone that the action is a duty; also it is valid as duty solely through the conviction being *declared*. For universal self-consciousness is free from the *specific* action that merely *is*; what is valid for that self-consciousness is not the *action* as existence, but the *conviction* that it is a duty; and this is made actual in language. (PS, 396; PbG, 459)

Morality, which for Hegel now involves transfiguring the putative “immediacy” of an individual conscience into a social force, hinges on the felicitous performance or emulation of a more or less “settled” discursive practice. Viewed as such, morality is characterized by three crucial features: (1) its discursive mode of appearance is *necessary*, since it alone insures the existence of moral authority “for universal acknowledgment”; (2) the sincerity of moral speech is strictly an effect (though, obviously, “effect” can no longer be correlated with any dimension of intentionality or interiority whatever) of a speaker’s performative competence in emulating the rhetorical and generic *conventions* or, morally speaking, the *rules and norms* of such speech; and thus (3) the social efficiency (universality) of moral speech proves to be contingent on the *felicity* of its performance rather than on the *intentionality* of the “subject” of utterance.

What renders Hegel’s argument so volatile, yet also productive, is its recognition of the undecidable causality between an inward moral conviction and “its” socially visible, discursive appearance. The performative and strictly discursive phenomenality of the moral subject denies “conscience” and “conviction” any axiological or temporal priority over their discursive appearance. To thus redescribe morality as social and discursive practice rather than as an inward presence (“conviction”) is tantamount to rethinking the very idea of discursive practice itself. For we can now situate morality strictly in the “custom” (Lat., *mos*) that sustains the practice of any discourse whatsoever, which amounts to a structural rather than topical conception that implicitly suspends the traditional, emotivist paradigm of morality as the signification or expression of a putative “immediacy” (i.e., the interiority of moral self-consciousness

qua duty). Alternatively, we may provisionally redescribe morality as a rhetorical interaction with a social- and foreign-determined continuum of form- and genre-based practices or conventions of *meaning*. Undoubtedly, though, it is precisely this alienation [*Entäusserung*] of conscience into discourse that alarms Hegel; for it now appears that the sincerity and authority of moral conscience are irreducibly and precariously *the effects* of its universal linguistic performativity as “declaration” [*Aussprechen*]. Eager to reign in the deviant (i.e., undecidable) causality between the spirit and its word, Hegel now confronts the question as to “whether the assurance of acting from a conviction of duty is true” with categorical directness, namely, by declaring the very question inherently illegitimate:

Whether the assurance of acting from a conviction of duty is *true*, whether what is done is actually a *duty*—these questions or doubts have no meaning when addressed to conscience. To ask whether the assurance would be true would presuppose that the inner intention is different from the one put forward, i.e., that what the individual self wills, can be separated from duty, from the will of the universal and pure consciousness; the latter would be put into words, but the former would be strictly the true motive of action. But this distinction between the universal consciousness and the individual self is just what has been superseded, and the supersession of it is conscience. The self’s immediate knowing that is certain of itself is law and duty. Its intention, through being its intention, is what is right; all that is required is that it should know this, and should state its conviction that its knowing and willing are right. The declaration of assurance in itself rids the form of its particularity. It thereby acknowledges the *necessary universality of the self*. (PS, 396–97; PbG, 459–60)

On the surface, the passage seems unsettlingly circular in its logic, repeatedly proposing the outcome (“the necessary universality of the self”) as that which, in the embryonic form of an immediate belief, is said to have governed the discursive act (“declaration”) whereby a “conviction” is surreptitiously transmuted into something self-affirming or self-privileging (i.e., “assurance”).<sup>15</sup> Yet, aside from such *post hoc* reasoning—which adumbrates the much larger problematic of what Hegel calls “determinate negation”—the passage is not merely outrageous but also curiously suggestive. For Hegel has effectively begun to dissociate the question of morality—itsself by now all but coterminous with that concerning the

effective or felicitous instantiation of conscience qua “declaration”—from the traditional true/false opposition. The latter, he notes, presumes an extralinguistic criterion of verification (faith, intentionality, etc.) whose intrinsically subjective and particular status would render it incommensurable with the “necessary universality of self.” Yet this analysis of conscience not only calls into question the concept of “expressivity” that has been proposed as an encompassing paradigm for Hegel’s thought, but it positively identifies morality as an ideational effect of a verbal agent’s performance within a preestablished and conventional structure of “iterable” discursive forms.<sup>16</sup> If “declaration” is the semiotic and/or rhetorical infrastructure in virtue of which “conscience” can *appear*, we should also note that the appearance of “conscience”—itself the sublation of the oppositions between individuality and collectivity, between duties and Duty, between duty and law, etc.—requires the *disappearance* of that infrastructure itself.<sup>17</sup> That is, the felicity of the “declaration” of conscience, which involves its “acknowledgment” as social authority, proves contingent upon the inculcation of community-specific conventions of meaning whose “iterability” instantiates moral force not in a propositional, deictic, orthetic sense but as a structural, and thus inherently “invisible” event; it must be a *form* (e.g., the time-honored affiliation of the *idea* of morality with the *semiosis* of spontaneity):

It is *in the form of the act* that the universality lies. It is this form which is to be established as actual: it is the *self* which as such is actual in language, which declares itself to be the truth, and just by doing so . . . is acknowledged by [all other selves].” (*PS*, 397; *PbG*, 460)

Erich Tugendhat thus remarks quite concisely that “in addressing the question of how the consciousness relation is constituted, we must thoroughly abandon the idea of taking our bearing from any sort of inner perception.” Once the latter notion has been surrendered, it becomes apparent that Hegel “is referring to socio-anthropological structures, not ontological structures.”<sup>18</sup>

## II

Hegel’s significant conjugation of a notion of “form” with his indisputably performative conception of moral “self-declaration” calls up rather

similar paradoxes within related twentieth-century theory. For arguably the concept of “form” would seem nothing short of anathema to that of the performative. After all, isn’t John L. Austin’s self-irony, in *How To Do Things with Words*, precisely the result of that book’s progressive recognition of the impossibility of any formal determination of performative (illocutionary) meaning? And isn’t the gradual collapse of constative into performative, of locution into illocution, the result of a radically contextual paradigm of meaning according to which “it is essential to realize that ‘true’ and ‘false’ . . . [stand] only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to the wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes, and with these intentions” (*HTW*, 145)?<sup>19</sup> Before pursuing the central conflict between performative and formalist conceptions of meaning—staged in such lucid terms by Hegel’s *Phenomenology*—we should note, also so as to motivate the connection between Hegel’s moral theory and more recent theories of the performative, that Austin’s contextualist model of meaning-as-success-or-failure already hints at a fundamental moral force subtending discourse in general. Thus the constative true/false dyad becomes assimilated to the performative successful/unsuccessful opposition, only to be redescribed, for any genuinely specific contextual situation, as that of the “proper” or “wrong” thing to say.

To subscribe to Austin’s familiar shorthand definition of performatives as statements where “the uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act,” such as betting, christening, exchanging marriage vows, promising, etc.” (*HTW*, 8), is to recognize, minimally, that in an illocutionary act meanings are not so much generated as they are enlisted, cited, or used.<sup>20</sup> And when contextual and conventional constraints are said to have replaced a formal grammatical paradigm of meaning, a related casualty will be the concept of a self-present, “immediate” intentionality, a category repeatedly ironized in *How to Do Things with Words* almost from the start: “surely,” Austin remarks, “words must be spoken ‘seriously’ and so as to be taken ‘seriously’.

But we are apt to have a feeling that their being serious consists in their being uttered as (merely) the outward or visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act: from which it is but a short step to go on to believe or to assume without realizing that for many purposes the outward utterance is a description, *true or false*, of the occurrence of the inward performance. . . . It is

gratifying to observe . . . how excess of profundity, or rather solemnity, at once paves the way for immorality. For one who says "promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act" is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorizers: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space, with all the distinction of a specialist in the *sui generis*. Yet he provides Hyppolitus with a let-out, the bigamist with an excuse for his "I do" and the welsher with a defence for his "I bet." Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*. (*HTW*, 9–10)<sup>21</sup>

These remarks certainly seem to dispel Derrida's insistent yet misguided critique that "performative meaning once more becomes the communication of an intentional meaning" or that "intention remains the organizing center" of the illocutionary operation.<sup>22</sup> As proved to be the case with Hegel's thesis on moral "declaration," Austin's notion of a subjective interiority—whether we are to think it as "immediacy" or "intentionality"—can only be thought as the *correlate of discursive self-enactment*. Belonging to the order of "appearance" (*Erscheinung*), the semiolinguistic nature of Hegel's moral "personality" is fully contingent on what Austin calls "uptake," thus proving an effect of social interpretation rather than private volition.

Yet in thus characterizing the *phenomenality* of (moral) meaning within a network of contextual and conventional constraints, Austin suddenly adopts an uncharacteristically hesitant, reduplicative phrasing, referring to "words . . . spoken 'seriously' and *so as to be taken 'seriously'*" (italics added). Along with the performative *function* of an illocutionary act there emerges the need for renewed consideration of the formal *structure* of that act, qua locution in general. Derrida first raised the issue when insisting on a "general and systematic elaboration of the structure of locution which avoids the endless alternation of essence and accident" (*SEC*, 324).

Aside from all the questions posed by the very historically sedimented notion of "convention," we must notice here: (1) that to consider only the conventionality that forms the *circumstance* of the statement, its contextual surroundings, and not a certain intrinsic conventionality of that which constitutes the locution itself, that is, everything that might quickly be summarized under the problematic heading of the "arbitrariness of the sign"; . . . Ritual is not an eventuality, but, as iterability, is a structural characteristic of every mark. . . . Is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, "non-serious," that is, *citation* (on

the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a "successful" performative? (*SEC*, 323–24; 325)

We cannot rehearse any further the contentious aftermath of Austin's argument by a host of very disparately motivated readers.<sup>23</sup> What Derrida successfully and, for our purposes significantly, remarks, however, is the need to consider the perceived *formal* quality of the utterance itself as the exclusive resource for the inculcation of its situational or contextual impact and effect. It is in the "form" or "structure" of a locution—by which we are to understand both its grammatical quality as well as more overtly contingent matters, such as intonation, diction, tone, choice of medium and/or channel of communication, etc.—that its social function (and, in virtue of that function, a certain assessment of "context") can constitute itself materially. Austin himself, we recall, refers to this issue as "securing the uptake" of a statement (*HTW*, 117; 139). Hence his contention "that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech-situation" (*HTW*, 139) may require some modification. For we have now reason to understand the *form* of that utterance itself as the principal index of *how* a given agency has come to *interpret* that "speech-situation," that is, *how* it wishes to enter into a nexus of discourse-patterns and discourse-constraints whose (inherently moral) *force* may be defined along an often unspecified amalgamation of economic, gendered, ethnic, and religious parameters.<sup>24</sup> In short, it is the speech act's affirmation/modification of a locutionary form and thus the interpretive assessment of discursive "propriety" that intimates the "morality" of the speaker. Once again, it is to be stressed that by "morality" we are not primarily concerned with the familiar dilemmas and exemplary motifs of formal ethics. Rather, morality inheres in the irreducibly discursive and thus social "attitude" (no longer a "pure" psychological concept) of the speaker, that is, his or her willingness to conform to, alter, disrupt, or challenge, etc., the currently relevant "dimension of assessment—how the words stand in respect of satisfactoriness to the facts, events, situations, &c. to which they refer" (*HTW*, 149) or, as we should qualify, "are (interpretively) taken to be referring to."

Michael Oakeshott's neopragmatist discussion of morality may help to clarify how all discursive practice is invariably imbued with a continuously operative, latent moral "motivation," and how an explicitly "theoretical" engagement of discursive practice (no matter what the theory in

question is a theory of) merely renders this circumstance more visible. "Morality," according to Oakeshott,

is like an art in having to be learned, in being learned better by some than by others, in allowing for almost endless opportunity for individual style, and in which virtuosity and mastery are distinguishable; and it is like a language in being an instrument of understanding and a medium of intercourse, in having a vocabulary and syntax of its own, and in being spoken well or ill. (*OHC*, 62)

Similar to Hegel and Austin, Oakeshott readily acknowledges the undecidability of inward "conscience" and social "declaration" or, as he puts it, between "the compunctions of 'virtuous' self-enactment and those of moral self-disclosure" (*OHC*, 76). The futility of insisting on any rigorous and transcendental distinction in this regard is explained by the obvious fact that the vocabularies of either position coalesce into "a single language" (*OHC*, 77).<sup>25</sup> In arguing that morality is "a language spoken well or ill on every occasion of human intercourse," Oakeshott also affirms that discursive practice is moral not merely in a topical, thematic, and incidental sense but, on the contrary, is being "performed" at all times "in" saying anything whose locutionary form discernibly links that utterance to a community and its perceived "logic of sense." Hence morality constitutes "neither a system of general principles nor a code of rules, but a vernacular language," and "what has to be learned in moral education is . . . how to speak the language intelligently" (*OHC*, 78–79). Oakeshott proceeds to characterize the inherently moral energy that informs discursive practice with an indeed appropriate mixture of lucidity and eloquence:

Every such vernacular of moral converse . . . emerges as a ritual of utterance and response, a continuously extemporized dance whose participants are alive to one another's movements and to the ground upon which they tread. . . . [It] is responsive to the aspirations of those who speak it and it is amplified in the *pia libertas* of its conscientious users. It is never fixed or finished, but (like other languages) *it has a settled character* in terms of which it responds to the linguistic inventions, the enterprises, the fortunes, the waywardness, the censoriousness, and sometimes the ridicule of those who speak it. Although a moral language may obtrude rules and duties, these are not targets to be aimed at but *nodal densities of sentiment* to which an agent who is familiar with the language and *who acknowledges its authority* recognizes himself to

be incited to subscribe. Learning to speak a language of self-enactment is *learning how to subscribe to its intimations of "virtue"*. (*OHC*, 63–64, 75; italics mine)

What Oakeshott points to when he speaks of the "settled character" and those "nodal densities of sentiments" and "intimations of 'virtue'" can be identified, I think, as precisely those formal features of the vernacular that have been of concern to us from the outset. And yet, the genteel and serene confidence with which morality is being reconceived as linguistic practice shrouds the underlying, conservative ideology ("an agent who is familiar with *the* language and acknowledges its authority") according to which agency is conflated with acceptance into a linguistic community that, in turn, Oakeshott can think as a priori *one* language only. A diametric reversal of Hegel's categorical identification of moral "conviction" with its "necessarily universal" other, "conscience," has taken place; for Oakeshott has essentially transferred the attribute of "immediacy" from its traditional site ("consciousness") unto language. The self-sameness or homogeneity of "a moral language" has become paradigmatic, thus exiling the possibility of all difference from language itself. If difference were to assert itself effectively, we are to conclude, Oakeshott would simply consider it as *another* language.

Nevertheless, with due qualification, what remains of relevance to both Theory in general and specific forms of cultural critique, is precisely Oakeshott's intimation of the social, regulative efficiency of "form" and, indeed, of specific discursive "genres." Moral authority, according to Oakeshott, arises out of a felicitous rhetorical practice that configures generic features and situational demands.<sup>26</sup> Hence it does not express and signify inward meanings but constitutes the emergence of an utterance into an assemblage of generically fixed and predecided meanings. Thus, rather than becoming the fetish of essentialist affirmation or deconstructionist critique, the time-honored concept of "immediacy" emerges as a *social force* instantiated by the vernacular practice of discourse. The meanings of such practice will vary depending on the speaker's interpretive assessment of what would be the most appropriate formal relation to (or self-enactment *within*) the discursive conventions and constraints assumed to be "at stake," all the while understanding such "propriety" strictly as the "subjective" and contingent interpretive ratio of once again "subjective" interest and communal constraint, of verbal (and, by implication, political) imagination and discursive precept, respectively. To be sure, these hermeneutic predecisions, which in turn may obtain at varying

levels of awareness, can be subjected to some interpretive and metalingual commentary that, in turn, may seek to determine what prompted us to participate in a given discourse in this or that way. This latter kind of discourse is precisely what we commonly refer to and engage in under the title of "Theory," and its critically reflective supersession of the "immediacy" that produces significations in culture with talk *about* that culture intimates in striking manner the coinherence of analytic (abstract) conduct and eschatological motivation. At issue, for Theory, is not merely the performativity of gestures, acts, pronouncements, and works that instantiate (i.e., affirm/alter) a certain vision of culture but also the blind spot missed in those acts, that omission or lack of awareness that causes these acts to appear, upon retrospect, necessarily "infelicitous."

What Hegel's and Austin's reflections suggest and share, then, is that Theory can transcend the "immediacy" of a culture's and/or individual's self-blinded productivity of "meanings" only at the expense of a progressively stricter self-identification as a unique (i.e., abstract) discursive *form*. By now, of course, we also recognize how and for what reasons the notions of *form* and *genre* are so inextricably interwoven with social and moral "interest" and why it would seem precipitous to dismiss the concept of form as but a misguided, aggregational paradigm of meaning as conscious "immanence." As Michael Oakeshott notes,

Rules, duties, and the like (moral principles and dogmas) are, then, passages of stringency in a moral practice. But they should not be thought of as strands of some exceptionally tough material woven into the otherwise flimsy fabric of moral association, constituents not only of notable strength but also of independent authority; conservators of the integrity of a moral practice. Rather, they are to be recognized as *densities obtruded by the tensions of a spoken language of moral intercourse*, nodal points at which a practice turns upon itself in a vortiginous movement and becomes steadier in ceasing to be adventurous. They may help to keep a practice in shape, but they do not give it its shape. They are abstractions which derive their authority from the practice itself as a spoken language in which they appear as passages of somewhat exaggerated emphasis. (*OHC*, 67–68)

Again, one must wonder whether Oakeshott's qualifications of "rules, duties, and the like" as "passages of somewhat exaggerated emphasis" does not, in fact, intimate a contiguous trajectory leading from formal

recurrence to speculation about the "independent authority" of forms to conservatism ("ceasing to be adventurous") and, finally, to coercion and repression ("to help to keep a practice in shape"). The flaw in Oakeshott's argument lies in the self-evident ways in which a *certain* sense of moral practice, of moral value and, corresponding to these, of social and cultural organization is already in place before his otherwise lucid exposition of discursive practice begins to be enacted.

Keeping these serious problems of his argument in mind, we can nevertheless (and perhaps all the more clearly) identify how, more directly than either Hegel or Austin, Oakeshott has come to identify the *social efficiency of locutionary form*—here characterized with perhaps deceptive generality as "passages of stringency"—that shows illocutions of *all* sorts (those of the theorist included) to "secure uptake" and thus convert the putative inwardness and "immediacy" of conceptual labor into social authority. Hence the performative enactment of "immediacy" as moral agency and its reflective critique in the idiom of Theory reveal the concepts of locutionary form and performative function to collaborate in insuring the social/moral efficacy of discursive *practice*, rather than appearing as incompatible in *theory*. Hegel and the more recent analyses of the performative thus compel us to recognize a significant and indelibly structural, "moral" dimension in Theory, a dimension that manifests itself as soon as Theory becomes "critical" by directing its reflective energy at the precarious "immediacy" of cultural production while simultaneously refining (if not sublimating) its social interestedness qua reflective transcendence, that is, by cultivating, with varying intensity, its moral authority under the auspices of an expressly specialized and emblematically "rigorous" form.

## Notes

1. On the connection between "immediacy" as a purportedly natural and authoritative sensibility and its extension into a social norm qua "sympathy," see Lucinda Cole, "Anti-Feminist Sympathies: The Politics of Relationship in Smith, Wollstonecraft, and Moore," *ELH* 58 (1990): 107–40.
2. For Kant, see *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951), "Introduction," B XXXVIIff. and § 29, B 114–31; for Fichte, see *Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John L. Laclau (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), 189ff. and his contemporaneous essay fragments, "Von den Pflichten des Gelehrten" (On the duties of the scholar), *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Jacob (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1965–), II, 3:298ff.. Still the most incisive analysis of the status of

- feeling in Fichte can be found in Novalis; see his "Fichte-Studien," *Werke, Tagebücher, und Briefe*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl (Munich: Hanser, 1978), II, 7–209. Regarding the relation between competing idealist versions of "immediacy" and "self-consciousness," respectively, see Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Ulrich Posthut, *Über einige Fragen der Selbstbeziehung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1971); Dieter Henrich, "Selbstbewußtsein: Kritische Einleitung in eine Theorie," in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, ed. Rüdiger Bubner et al. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970), and his "Fichte's Original Insight," *Contemporary German Philosophy 1* (1982): 15–51. See also my introduction to *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory: Three Essays by F. W. J. Schelling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 1–57. Specifically on Novalis, see Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 248–86.
3. Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher, und Briefe*, II, 18 (translation mine).
  4. For alternative, critical accounts mediating romantic and/or idealist conceptions of the subject with contemporary theory, see Manfred Frank, *What is Neo-Structuralism?* trans. Sabine Wilke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
  5. Alan Liu, "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," *Representations* 32 (1990): 75–113; see also his earlier "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism," *ELH* 56 (1989): 721–71.
  6. The formulation is Jérôme McGann's in *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 12; see also pp. 13 and 56.
  7. The eschatological motivation of cultural criticism emerges with exemplary distinctness in recent, new historicist and cultural materialist reassessments of romanticism. Thus Marjorie Levinson, in an essay appropriately entitled "The New Historicism: Back to the Future," remarks how "we are the ones who, by putting the past to a certain use, put it in a certain order." While the phrase, which echoes her earlier credo in a "self-consciously belated criticism," inaugurates a "transhistorical dialectic" that "might also be an effect of the past which we study," it is nevertheless clear that "the origin coalesces as a structure . . . only by the retroactive practice of the present" (*Rethinking Historicism*, ed. M. Levinson [New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989], 20–23).
  8. For probing analyses of the interaction between moral theory and larger conceptions of cultural productivity, see Julie Ellison's *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). See also my own argument on the coherence of social theory and the seemingly narrow, technical focus of poetic theory in Wordsworth, in "Elementary Feelings" and "Distorted Language": The Pragmatics of Culture in Wordsworth's *Preface 1800*, *New Literary History* 24, no. 1 (1993): 125–46.
  9. For a rereading of contemporary moral theory—which is not our principal concern here—see Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).
  10. Michael Oakeshott, *Of Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 60; henceforth cited parenthetically as *OHC*.
  11. Regarding Hegel's logic of reflection, see Martin Heidegger, *Hegel's Concept of*

- Experience*, trans. Kenley Royce Dove (New York: Octagon, 1983), and Heidegger lectures entitled *Hegel's Phänomenologie des Geistes*, vol. 32 of the *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980). See also Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), as well as Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 23–59 and Erich Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*.
12. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 365. *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952). All subsequent citations will be parenthetical, using the abbreviations of *PS* and *PBG* for the English and German text, respectively.
  13. For a relevant, partially convergent interpretation of Hegel, see Jürgen Habermas: *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. Lenhardt and S. Nichols (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), especially pp. 195–211.
  14. Much of John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) is of course dedicated to exposing the fragility of the distinction between the performative and the constative and that between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. See especially pp. 109–52.
  15. Recently, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith has redescribed this figure of epistemic conservatism as "epistemic self-privileging," an originally Platonic figure of thought in which "the Skeptic's annihilation is required, produced, and guaranteed by the Believer's belief." "Belief and Resistance: A Symmetrical Account," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 125–39; quote from 130. See also her more explicit discussion of such epistemic self-privileging in "Unloading the Self-Refutation Charge," forthcoming; it corresponds to what in the present essay I invoke under the title of "immediacy."
  16. Such an "expressivist" model of consciousness as the salient characteristic of Hegel's thought has been set forth by Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and more recently, by the same author, *Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
  17. On the concept of "infrastructure" in the work of Jacques Derrida, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 142–63. In his comment on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Jean Hyppolite remarks on the centrality of language in relation to conscience, yet he views it still as merely ancillary, and clarifying, expressive of an interior and thus heteronomous essence or meaning. *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 496–512.
  18. Tugendhat, *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, 9, 33.
  19. John L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), henceforth cited parenthetically as *HTW*.
  20. John Searle's insistence that we discriminate between "use" and "mention" presupposes a self-present, immediate subjectivity as the "utterance origin" whose intentionality would support that distinction, itself obviously cognate with that between sincere and insincere speech. Yet, as Hegel has shown, the notion of "conscience" and moral agency already requires the suspension (or supersession) of such a private, ego-logical, and intentionalist paradigm of meaning. For the texts by Searle, see notes 22 and 23 below.
  21. For a lucid discussion of this passage and its history of being misread, see Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 84–85. Austin again explores the duplicitous logic of moral "immediacy" later on, *HTW*, 78–79. W.

must stress, however, that his critique of intentionality and inward self-presence is simply based on the assumption of a "false consciousness." For a lucid analysis of the epistemological conundrum of lying, see J. L. Austin's "Pretending," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 253-71.

22. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 322, 323. Derrida's critique often appears far more pertinent to John Searle's theory of the performative as set forth in *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); their debate is examined by Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, 131-46.

23. For positions of a decidedly "conservative" and, at times, orthodox inflection, see John Searle's *Speech Acts* as well as his polemic against Derrida in "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyphs* 1 (1977): 198-208, and Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). A more flexible assessment of Austin, though perhaps too oblivious of Austin's persistent refusal of philosophical "seriousness" and "rigor," can be found in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed. Samuel Weber (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), which contains Derrida's earlier "Signature, Event, Context" and, responding to John Searle's critique of that essay, the title essay itself. See also Stanley Fish, "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle," in *Is there a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), and, more recently, "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida" in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), 37-67, and Sandra Petrey's recent reexamination of all these debates in *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Manfred Frank has reconsidered the debates from a continental perspective, aiming at the renewal of a dialogue between hermeneutic and poststructuralist thought, in *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980).

24. It is (a significant paradox, to be sure) just as appropriate to speak of "style" as of "form," since the iterable (conventional) and the unique (original) moment in speech are dialectically related as two sides of the same coin. Clearly the most significant theorist of a contextually, rather than aesthetically, motivated analysis of "style," Friedrich Schlegel recognized that if the production of meaning inheres in a dialectic of style/form or innovation/conformity, this "immediate" ratio can be recovered only by approximation, namely, in an infinite "oscillation" of interpretation between speculation and comparison. For an assessment of the significance of Schleiermacher's *Dialectic and Hermeneutics* to contemporary theory, see my "Immediacy and the Text: Friedrich Schleiermacher's Theory of Style and Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51 (1990): 51-73.

25. Elucidating morality as a type of discursive action, Habermas inexplicably falls back on a prelinguistic, ideational paradigm of moral "norms." While initially misconstruing Austin's concept of the performative as bearing a strictly "derivative" [*abgeleitet*] relation to such norms, Habermas eventually acknowledges that to isolate them as values preexisting their discursive iteration would be to adopt a "utopian" vision of morality. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 60-62.

26. For a very lucid conception of genre as the discursive infrastructure for social and cultural practice (including the practice of "theory," see Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-67.

## "Non-Identity": The German Romantics, Schelling, and Adorno

Andrew Bowie

One of the major issues to emerge from the theoretical debates surrounding poststructuralism was the suspicion of an often very vaguely understood notion of "identity." The last thing anyone wanted to be involved in was the "repression of difference" entailed by "Western metaphysics." As the debate became less parochial and it became clear that Jacques Derrida was not the only person to be suspicious of Hegel's *Logos*, it was realized that there is a complex tradition of Western thought, associated in particular with the German romantics, that had already explored many of the issues concerning identity and difference.<sup>1</sup> The most evident representative of this tradition in more recent theory was T. W. Adorno, who made the critique of "identity thinking" one of his main philosophical aims. Like so many others, including Derrida, he did so not least in terms of his suspicion of, and simultaneous admiration for, Hegel. Adorno's approach to "non-identity" strikes a chord through its insistence on the need to attend to what is repressed in the increasingly administered and bureaucratic world of modern science and technology. The power of Adorno's position becomes most apparent in his philosophical interpretations of modern art, which at their best sustain the tension between the aesthetic need to do justice to the particular and the

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