

BILL COMES INTO THE ROOM, DISCUSSES HEGEL

By Brendon Sykes

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor LARRY SMITH writes:*

“Bill Comes Into the Room, Discusses Hegel” is a trap, which from a reader’s perspective is usually good news for a couple of reasons. Ensnarement cannot be an indifferent experience for the reader; it can even be transformational. Also, by definition, in order to spring a trap, the author has to be in control, of the narrative and of his or her own consciousness.

The control exerted here by Brendon Sykes is admirable. I began reading with the pleasant anticipation of a send-up of German philosophy, certainly merited in re Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. I was not initially disappointed. Even after the initial exchange with the dying mother, the story’s ostensibly parodic tone still beguiles. The initial exchange with the UPS man is very funny indeed – imagine sharing Hegelian jargon with a UPS man – until we later understand that man to be one of the harbingers and messengers of cold horror.

That horror is pretty horrific: not just the fact of an incestuous rape but reminders of what it entails, e.g., a child’s bloodied orifice. Mr. Sykes’ style and strategy enable him to maintain command of the narrative: no bathos, no explosions in prose of desperate, convulsive trauma. The content darkens but never the tone as we glide blithely and seamlessly into a realization of what the story is actually about.

Once trapped, we grimly realize what might lie behind much of the seemingly breezy language. An email from nowhere in the Thesis section of the Hegelian dialectic asks Bill, “Did you bleed?” to which Bill replies, “I’ve got to go now.” What kind of scatological pun, post anal rape, might “go now” be? For that matter, why is Bill “coming” in the room to begin with? And twice he’s reassured that “Bill, we’re all behind you.” The whole world? Ouch!

Then there is the matter of Hegel himself, not just an Ivory Towerish escape for Bill from unbearable reality but the very personification of an over-civilized patriarchy unleashing its not such noble savagery. I believe it was Jung who once described Hegel’s language as an infestation, a release of monstrous wraiths from the unconsciousness, symptoms of a psyche in which consciousness and unconsciousness are disastrously disconnected in the first instance.

Finally, I'm going to self-indulge a mite because I hope Mr. Sykes will appreciate it. He ends his story (rather pointedly) with Eddie Fisher singing his hit song of 1954, "Oh My Papa." I actually reference that same tune in a story from my book A Shield of Paris called "Her Story: Part Seven" to suggest that Amy Fisher (as in Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco) was, ahem, the illegitimate daughter of Eddie Fisher. Mr. Sykes and I may be the only two writers in the last half-century to reference this dreadful song, albeit to different purposes.

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author's own. Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Bill looked out the window. He saw a man walking past wearing a sandwich board. On the front it read, *Bill, I think instead of sublation you mean sublimation. That's what you did with your feelings.*

There was a tree in front of the house and the trunk bisected the big picture window. The man wearing the board kept walking. On the back Bill read, Sublation, sublution. A tisket, a tasket.

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Frances, December 21

Bill came into the room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

Hegel, he said.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Which Hegel are you referring to?

The philosopher.

His full name is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Okay, thanks.

His dates are August 20, 1770 to November 14, 1831.

Right. Who is this?

Click.

Bill came into the room. He sat down. On the table beside him was a book. He picked it up.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he said.

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, are you going to talk about H's absolute idealism?

Yes, I am as a matter of fact.

Then don't forget to bring up the concept of *Geist*.

No. I'm going to talk about *Geist*. I was going to present it as a *modus* of integration—

You mean sublation?

Sublation. *Aufheben*.

Okay, thanks.

Thanks for emailing.

Bill came into the room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

The author of this book is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher who lived from 1770 to 1831. The title is *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I'd like to talk to you about his concept of absolute idealism. After that, I'd like to explore sublation, something Hegel called *Aufheben*. Does anyone want coffee before I begin?

PHONE CALL

Billy, it's your mother.

Hi, Mom.

Why do you never call?

How are things?

I'm in the hospital.

What's wrong?

I'm dying.

Sorry to hear it.

Sorry. Schmorry. Your mother's dying and you don't have time for a call.

Listen, Mom, I've got to go.

You never loved me but I loved you.

Click.

Bill came into the room. Beside the window stood a chair and a table. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

My mother's dying, he said. No. Sorry. Hegel, he said. Back to the concept of sublation. It's really only one part of his theoretical process, a triadic formulation or hyper-theory that he called *Entwicklung*. Essentially this can be divided into thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

KNOCK, KNOCK!

Bill got up from the table and went to the door. He opened it. A UPS guy's standing there. He's holding a clipboard.

Yes?

When you talk about *Entwicklung* can you use the example of 'liberty'?

Sure.

Include the savage, tyranny and the transforming nature of civilization.

Will do. Thanks for the prompt.

The UPS guy said, We're here to deliver.

Bill closed the door. He went back into the room. After he sat down he picked a book up from the table.

You all know this is Hegel, he said. Let's talk about his tri-particularized schema with regard to something like...well, liberty. Start with a 'savage'. What's a savage? In Hegel's definition, a savage is a human being who represses nothing in thought and action. You've heard of the 'It' Girl? This is the 'Id' Man. That's the first stage, the thesis. Then, we follow the savage as he enters a new stage of development. Now he's traded unrestrained freedom for society and the constraints of law. This is the antithesis, so called because it's the opposite of the thesis; if not the annihilation, certainly the *sublation* of the thesis. The last stage, the synthesis, presents a savage transformed by civilization. He enjoys a

new remodeled liberty—one not characterized by Id-iotic impulse and unbridled expression but a will-to-determine freedom that emerges as ‘meaningful volition’.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Gasp...gasp...cough...gasp...

Hello...?

Billy.

Mom?

Why do you never call?

Are you okay?

Gasp...gasp...gasp...

Get some rest, Mom.

Click.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down, picked up the book, put it down again, and frowning, assumed a posture of remarkable beauty that reminded one of Rodin’s *Le Penseur*. Appropriate because Bill was thinking.

The savage. Is he noble? Rousseau thought so. I don’t. I knew a savage. He came into my room at night. Mom was asleep. What are you supposed to do in the morning? Eat your corn flakes or tell your mother that—

Bill stopped. He was shaking.

A ROCK FLIES THROUGH THE WINDOW

There was a message tied to it. On a piece of paper the thrower had written, I know it's tough but do you want to be the 'Id' Man forever? Say it, Bill. Open up and share it. You'll feel better. We're all rooting for you. Sublation soon to be ovation!

Bill turned the paper over. It was a lot to write on a piece of toilet tissue. The penmanship was good, though. There was a post-script. Say it, Bill.

I'm 7 years old. I've got friends, blood in my young veins, sunshine all over my future. He was smart. He waited until Mom was asleep. And then I'd hear him climb the stairs. I could smell what he was drinking before he got to my room. When the door opened he had a finger to his lips. Shhh. Then he crept in.

What am I supposed to do?

Go on. You're doing fine.

Sit there the next morning and eat my corn flakes and tell my mother he—he—?

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, your dad was a savage. Truly. And not just in the Hegelian sense. In the *daemoniac* sense, too. He was a beast. Pure thesis.

Thanks. Thanks for your sympathy.

Did you bleed?

I've got to go now.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He didn't pick it up.

I want to talk about Hegel but I can't do it. My mind's flooded with things from long ago and I'm being dragged down by them. I got a message on a rock thrown through my window. It urged me to be truthful. To essentially, I guess, *unburden* myself. What do you do in a situation like that? You're 7. You're dumb and trusting. You especially trust your dad. He's the guy you look up to. And you still think you're looking up to him. You're 7. You go downstairs in the morning. There's a box of cornflakes on the kitchen table. There's your bowl and the spoon with the spaceship handle. What do you do? Do you eat your cereal or tell your mother that dad came into your room and fucked you? And yes, I bled.

Bill looked out the window. He saw a man walking past wearing a sandwich board. On the front it read, *Bill, I think instead of sublation you mean sublimation. That's what you did with your feelings.*

There was a tree in front of the house and the trunk bisected the big picture window. The man wearing the board kept walking. On the back Bill read, Sublation, sublution. A tisket, a tasket.

Bill watched the man go down the street until he disappeared around a corner. He went back and sat down. He looked at the book on the table. It was a long time before he picked it up.

Hegel, he said. Then he stared into space for a moment. I bled. You're damn right. You think you know pain? You don't know anything close to it until something like that. *Exclamation mark, Bill. Goddammit, this is exclamatory!*

You think you know pain? You don't know anything CLOSE to it UNTIL SOMETHING LIKE THAT!

CONFERENCE PHONE CALL

Good, Bill.

My heart goes out to you, buddy.

Hang in there, Billy boy.

We love you, William. Fuck the savage! Oops. You know what I mean. May the pervert burn in Hell!

Fuck Hegel for that matter.

Bill, we're all behind you.

THESIS

A boy is born.

ANTITHESIS

His father sodomizes him. His mother, maybe she knows, maybe she suspects, but she doesn't do anything. Brush your teeth. Change your socks. Eat your cereal.

SYNTHESIS

He does not cry at his father's funeral. He never calls his mother.

Bill sits up in his chair. He shakes himself. He is still holding the book. Now he raises it.

Hegel, he says. We...we would describe the THESIS, in a Hegelian dialectic, as *An-sich* (in itself). This would be the boy, well, me, as innocent as a newly born body. As radiantly innocent as Blake's little lamb. The ANTITHESIS, of course, involves the savage and his unrestrained impulses. Without going into the sordid details, this is *Anderssein* (Out of itself). The SYNTHESIS speaks...speaks—is full frontal explanatory. I never cried at my dad's funeral. I'm not going to cry for my mother. My mother is dying. I'm going to sit here like a defiant boy and not eat my Corn Flakes. To love one is to forgive all. This is the equivalent—but in a diminished sense, a very diminished sense—of *An-und-fur-sich* (In and for itself).

Does anyone want coffee?

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Bill, it's the doctor. Your mother's on her last breath. Do you want to say anything to her?

No.

Can you keep a confidence, Bill?

I beg your pardon?

It doesn't make any difference now.

What doesn't make any difference?

Your father didn't die naturally. Your mother murdered him.

What?

I'm so sorry.

What...?

I'm so sorry, Bill.

Click.

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, you're using Hegel to avoid your feelings. Your SYNTHESIS is unsatisfactory due to a lack of affect.

You have unfinished business. You need to go back to the THESIS but especially the ANTITHESIS and finish it.

Bill left the room. He went into the kitchen and stood looking out the window. He saw his reflection in the glass, dim, kind of soapy on the plate. Like the email said, it was a vague incomplete Bill and it didn't

feel satisfactory. In the sky above a plane flew past. Attached to the tail was a long flyer. Something was written on it. Bill reached for his binoculars. He read, *Repression=Mechanical Man. Decompress Repression, Bill.*

Bill muttered, Yeah. And *bukake* is bakery in Japanese.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up. But...but for the life of him he couldn't read the title out loud. So he thought, You guys know what this is. Hegel.

LIVE TV

Bill, this is Bill Williams, news reporter for BWWB. Your mother passed away a few minutes ago at Blake-Anderssein Memorial Hospital. Bill, I know this must be hard for you but you're never going to be whole again until you face the past, and Bill—the truth, Bill. Mom knew. Your Mom knew. And she did something about it. In other news today...

PHONE CALL

We're all behind you, champ!

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Bill opened the door. It was the UPS guy.

Yes?

She must've seen the blood.

Bill closed the door.

From behind it the UPS guy shouted, she must've known!

Bill came into the living room. In the corner by the window were a chair and a table. He sat down. He considered picking up the book, Hegel, no, he didn't do that.

He always cleaned me up after. There wasn't a huge amount anyway. It was mostly the first couple of times. After that my body, my body was I guess just as numb as my brain. If you block it out, it's not happening. But I can still remember. He whispered in my ear after he positioned himself on top of me. Daddy's the train and Billy's the tunnel. Open wide.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

She murdered him for you, Bill.

Why isn't she in jail?

It looked like natural causes.

Why didn't she tell me?

Now there's a good idea.

Did the doctor know?

Ask him, Bill.

Who is this?

Click.

Bill took his phone from the kitchen and went back into the living room. He paced in front of the window. Then he called the Blake-Anderssein Memorial Hospital. He wanted to speak to the doctor.

Did you know? Were you in this together? Were you her lover?

Hello?

This is Bill.

Who do you wish to speak to, please?

The doctor.

The doctor's not available right now. Can I take a message?

Click.

Bill was coming apart. All this Id percolating to the surface. Fire hiss and cauldron bubble. I need a drink.

I need a toke. I need a SYNTHESIS.

O Georg Our Geist in Ages Past...

Bill picked up his cell and stepped out of the house. He needed air. He couldn't even remember what she looked like. It was that long ago, the well was that deep. You never call. Sure there were pictures and sure he couldn't couldn't couldn't throw them out. But did he want to look at them?

He glanced down the street. He expected to see the guy with the sandwich board. There was nobody.

But something was scrawled on the sidewalk, words written in chalk. The penmanship was good.

I loved you but you never loved me.

You seek SYNTHESIS, Bill. It only comes with forgiveness. Forgive this woman who gave you life and took the life of the savage who was taking yours. Forgive, Bill. Decompress repression.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Bill, your mother has just died and you don't feel anything. You're the It Man, Bill. The Person as Object.

The post-modern humanoid. The perishable mitochondria that goes through life devoid of feeling.

Flattened affect, Bill.

Hegel?

Freud. Forgive and move on, Bill. It's the new freedom. Dig deep for the 'liberty', the *An-und-fur-sich* you seek. The freedom that comes through civilizing the impulses, the savage impulses, Bill, liberty in a higher key than Blake's little lamb ever experienced.

I can't talk now.

Bill, listen to me... You are the post-modern *hominid*. You feel nothing. You are Sartre's man without Sartre.

Who is this?

Do it, Bill. For her sake and yours. Feel something. It's the SYNTHESIS you seek.

Click.

Bill went back inside. The TV was still on. He looked at the screen. It showed a guy making a pizza. When he took it out of the oven a voice screamed, Your SYNTHESIS is waiting!

Beside the table was a chair. Bill sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

Hegel, he said. Feel something, he said.

Bill can't feel what he knows he should. Bill can't feel what he knows. Bill can't feel. He stands up and walks around. He goes back to the chair. He sits down. He picks up the book, flips through the pages and

puts it on the table again. He picks up his mobile. He puts it down and picks it up again and taps his iTunes. File? Vintage.

EDDIE FISHER (1954)

Click it.

Can't.

Click it, Bill.

Can't.

Click it.

Click.

O My Papa.

It's the best he can do.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I came. I saw. I came again.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Brendon Sykes not only questions the big stuff in philosophy, he also questions his own existence. Last summer, he realized a milestone in self-revelation. 'I drink, therefore I am.' His essay *Notes on the Ontological Argument to a Budding Philosopher* appeared in Issue 2 Nonfiction. He is currently working on a novel, which for him, is entirely novel. He makes trouble in TO with CP and NN.

EDITOR'S BIO: Larry Smith's story collection, *A Shield of Paris* and *Floodlands* were published in 2019 by Adelaide Books. His novella, *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* was published in 2016 by Outpost 19. Smith's stories have appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Serving House Journal*, *Sequestrum*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Collagist* and *{PANK}*, among numerous others. His poetry has appeared in *Descant* (Canada) and *Elimae*, among

others. Smith lives in New Jersey. Visit Larrysmithfiction.com His stories **Totem and Taboo** and **Gag and May Gag** appear in this issue.