

# Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Spirit

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Giving voice to a common view, Theodor Adorno writes in his study of Søren Kierkegaard that the 'pathos of his philosophy' from 'the very first sentence of his pseudonymous works' is directed against 'the assertion of the identity of the external and the internal'.<sup>1</sup> And he quotes from the preface to *Either/Or* (1843):

It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer. Perhaps you yourself have concealed a secret that in its joy or in its pain you felt was too intimate to share with others. Perhaps your life has put you in touch with people about whom you suspected that something of this nature was the case, although neither by force nor by inveiglement were you able to bring out into the open that which was hidden.<sup>2</sup>

These highly charged spatial metaphors indeed recur throughout Kierkegaard's work setting up a number of dichotomies that, it must be said, do not necessarily line up with one another. Perhaps best-known is Abraham's inside-outside discord in *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>3</sup> On the mountain in the land of Moriah, as good as alone in the universe, the Abraham who decides to sacrifice his son cannot articulate what he is doing. The

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kenter (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 29

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Enten-eller*, Første Deel [henceforth EE1], in *Samlede Værker*, vol. I (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901), v / Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, part I, trans. Howard Hong & Edna Hong, in *Søren Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. III (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) [henceforth EO1], 3

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven* in *Samlede Værker*, vol. III (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901), 104f. / Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard Hong & Edna Hong, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. VI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 68f.

designation ‘murder’ would fail to do justice to the exceptional religious situation. There can be no adequate description of that act, no external expression of the inner decision in general terms, with predicates involving universals.

But it seems to have escaped Adorno that Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with this issue, and his fetish for inwardness and ‘the inner’, did not begin with *Either/Or*. He engaged with it already in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841). There Kierkegaard writes, for example, that Socratic irony ‘maintains the contradiction between essence and phenomenon, between the internal and the external’.<sup>4</sup> And Socrates himself, Kierkegaard writes, ‘belonged to the breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point. The outer continually pointed to something other and opposite’.<sup>5</sup> If the mythical Don Giovanni is said to be flesh incarnate in *Either/Or*,<sup>6</sup> the historical person Socrates embodies disembodiment—embodies the impossibility of the spirit’s full embodiment. The fact that even his own contemporaries had such different views of him—so that there is such a problem as the problem of Socrates—is according to Kierkegaard a consequence of Socrates’ inside-outside discord. Yet if we in our day cannot observe Socrates directly, in his ‘phenomenal manifestation’, that is not necessarily an impediment to understanding him—quite the contrary, Kierkegaard ventures audaciously. For it serves to isolate our understanding of Socrates from the disturbances of what we might call historical-phenomenal background noise, and is an occasion to ‘conjure him forth with the aid of the idea, to make him

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<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Om Begrebet Ironi* [henceforth BI], in *Samlede Værker*, vol. XIII (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1906), 331/ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony and Notes on Schelling’s Berlin Lectures* [henceforth CI], trans. Howard Hong & Edna Hong, in *Søren Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 257

<sup>5</sup> BI 108 / CI 12

<sup>6</sup> Cf. EE1 70 / EO1 88

visible in his ideal form—in other words, to become conscious of the idea that is the meaning of his existence in the world’.<sup>7</sup> Nor should the confusion to which Socrates gave rise dismay us in our quest for the truth about him: we should seize upon it as yet another clue in our investigation. In Socrates, the outer ‘was not at all in harmony with the inner’, Kierkegaard writes, and only ‘under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended’.<sup>8</sup>

Kierkegaard is not inhibited by the problem of Socrates, then, and it is anyway part of his thesis that Socrates is not a product of his time and, in that sense, is not an essentially historical figure. Kierkegaard’s Socrates is more of a mythical personage; we could read the story Kierkegaard tells of Socrates as a myth or a recollection that is truer than empirically accurate accounts. In a recent paper, Jon Stewart sets out to show how close Kierkegaard’s conception of history, in *The Concept of Irony*, is to Hegel’s.<sup>9</sup> To this I would like to add that Kierkegaard’s conception of history is also mythical, that is, Romantic; and that it is influenced not only by Hegel’s philosophy of history but also, crucially, by Hegel’s philosophy of art. Such a reading can helpfully draw on *The Concept of Irony*’s own account of myth, in the chapter on Plato, and on Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics. Myth appeals to the imagination; and according to Kierkegaard, truth remains mythical for Plato insofar as he conceives knowledge as a kind of seeing. Thus Kierkegaard remarks upon Diotima’s account of the ladder of love, where the lover ascends in abstraction in pursuit of unalloyed beauty, that what is most mythical about it

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<sup>7</sup> BI 279 / CI 198 (translation modified). For a discussion of this dubious argument and the apparent circularity of the process whereby Kierkegaard determines which dialogues are Socratic, see David Possen, ‘Protagoras and Republic: Kierkegaard and Socratic Irony’ in *Kierkegaard and the Greek World: Socrates and Plato*, ed. Jon Stewart & Katalin Nun (Ashgate: Farnham, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> BI 108 / CI 12

<sup>9</sup> Jon Stewart, ‘Hegel’s Historical Methodology in *The Concept of Irony*’, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2011)

is the idea that ‘beauty in and by itself must be *beheld*’.<sup>10</sup> The Form of the beautiful, I want to add, is the paradigmatic Form—the Form of Forms—insofar as Plato often describes beholding a Form as an overwhelmingly pleasant experience; that is, as an aesthetic experience.<sup>11</sup>

In his dissertation, Kierkegaard, too, proposes that his inquiry will yield an ‘image’. He vows to help us ‘see’ the concept of irony in and with its phenomenological manifestation, the person Socrates. This seeing, to be sure, is a ‘higher’, ‘internal’ form of seeing; the image Kierkegaard wants to project is one arrived at by ignoring not only actual sense data but more generally the kind of empirical data that amounts to no more than what we can refer to metaphorically as shallow—mere—appearances. In Kierkegaard’s metaphorical scheme, it is by ‘listening’ to Socrates rather than ‘looking’ at him that he hopes to grasp the truth about Socratic irony, a truth he then promises to transform into—or use to ‘conjure forth’—an ideal image presented to the mind’s eye. For all his insistence on the separation of essence and phenomenon, and on Socrates’ inside-outside discord, Kierkegaard conceives the goal of his dissertation to be the artistic project of making an inside appear as an outside. Not only does Kierkegaard, then, adopt a partly Romantic, partly Hegelian view of history as an a priori field of inquiry; his dissertation project is, like Hegel’s *magnum opus*, a phenomenology of spirit.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> BI 195 / CI 107

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic* VI, trans. G. M. A. Grube & C. D. C. Reeve in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 508de.

<sup>12</sup> To be sure, he disagrees with Hegel that Socrates was a perfect representative of his time whose position was continuous with what preceded him. Thus although Kierkegaard proposes to understand the historical moment of irony from the armchair, he doesn’t want to say that we can reconstruct an entire world history a priori. Nonetheless, his approach to the problem of Socrates might be more Hegelian than his critique of Hegel would let on. I will return to this issue towards the end of the paper (BI 280; 334 / CI 199; 260). Cf. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. I, trans. E. S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 384; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. II, trans. E. S. Haldane & F. H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 13.

The methodological statement that opens his dissertation and lays out his strategy for tackling the problem of Socrates also amounts to an entire philosophical methodology. To spell out the details of that methodology is the task of the present paper. I will defend two substantive interpretive claims in carrying it out: first, that Kierkegaard's conception of truth in the dissertation is (like Plato's) aesthetic; and second, that philosophy is for him (as for Plato) a form of love. The ideal philosopher is a knight of Eros. Lest anyone shrug this metaphilosophy off as the youthful whim of a Søren who had not yet become Kierkegaard, I will show how the same methodology is employed, and self-consciously so, in *Either/Or. The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* are in fact deeply connected, though they are never studied in conjunction.

I will begin in section 1 by disentangling Kierkegaard's complicated use of the metaphors of outer and inner, and seeing and hearing, in his account of knowledge and history. In section 2, I will show how closely Kierkegaard's understanding of his own task—both in *The Concept of Irony* and in *Either/Or*—lines up with Hegel's theory of the task of art. A Romantic influence is also evident in Kierkegaard's epistemology. In section 3 I move on to consider the role love plays in Kierkegaard's metaphilosophy. Here *Either/Or*—Kierkegaard's great work on love—can illuminate the erotic metaphor that greets the reader on the very first page of Kierkegaard's dissertation. Both under his own name and under the cover of the pseudonym 'A', Kierkegaard suggests that lovers enjoy an epistemic privilege with regards to their beloveds. This is how he appropriates Plato's idea that philosophy is a form of love. I conclude in the fourth and final section by pointing out ways in which the methodology of Kierkegaard's speculative philosophy nevertheless departs from—improves upon—Plato's.

### 1. Hearing and seeing, inner and outer

In a post-script to his discussion of Plato in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard cites ‘results of scientific research’ which suggest that the *Apology* is a reliable document on the historical person Socrates. ‘Most scholars agree in assigning historical significance in the stricter sense to the *Apology*’, he writes, ‘and consequently I must, as I have done, lay primary stress upon it’. As for his own contribution to these research findings, Kierkegaard claims merely to have ‘endeavored to ascertain their correctness by an unbiased examination of a large portion of Plato’.<sup>13</sup> Encouraged by this passage, Paul Muench proclaims that the *Apology* is Kierkegaard’s most important source on Socrates in the dissertation.<sup>14</sup>

But the remark is a red herring. Titled ‘Justifying Retrospection’, the post-script is at once arrogant and defensive. By invoking ‘scientific results’ and a ‘scholarly consensus’, Kierkegaard was trying to preempt an objection from his dissertation committee. The ‘form of the whole treatise’, he writes elsewhere, ‘departs somewhat from the now widespread and in so many ways meritorious scholarly method’.<sup>15</sup> For Kierkegaard to extol academic norms in this way and excuse his own philosophical style is completely out of character; and indeed the logic of these statements is such that, for all his attempts to appease and disarm his prospective critics, his very reference to

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<sup>13</sup> BI 206-7 / CI 120-21

<sup>14</sup> Paul Muench, ‘Socratic Irony, Plato’s *Apology* and Kierkegaard’s *On the Concept of Irony*’, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2009)

<sup>15</sup> BI 240 / CI 156

scholars with their scholarly methods and findings unambiguously implies that he himself is not a scholar. Though he appears coyly to defer to scientific findings, his own aspiration was never to ascertain historical truth ‘in the stricter sense’; and it is not clear what it would even mean for a project such as his to be what he here calls ‘an unbiased examination’. The *Apology* may be historically accurate, but even in his treatment of that dialogue, Kierkegaard goes on to say, ‘I have had to conjure up the spirit of irony, so to speak, and let it gather itself and disclose itself in its complete totality’ and only then—so he suggests—only then does the real Socrates appear.<sup>16</sup>

Socrates’ life had meaning: this is what it means to say that he embodied an idea. But this meaning cannot simply be read off the historical facts of his life. There is a truth about Socrates that is not merely factual and that cannot be accessed through historical scholarship but only through philosophy. Using the Platonic terminology Kierkegaard would appropriate in his account of the aesthetic life, we can say that the truth about Socrates cannot be remembered but only recollected. In *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845), Kierkegaard writes that recollection grasps the essential whereas ordinary memory is cluttered with the accidental. Recollection ‘is ideality but as such it is strenuous and conscientious in a way completely different from indiscriminate memory’.<sup>17</sup> Memory ‘is immediate and is assisted immediately, recollection only reflectively’. For that reason, ‘it is an art to recollect’.<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, such recollection can yield a history of sorts. Like Romanticism, which would supplant empirical history with myth and art, or Hegel’s idealism, which

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<sup>16</sup> BI 212 / CI 126

<sup>17</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Stadier paa Livets Vei* [henceforth SLV] (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1902), 16 / Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, trans. Howard & Edna Hong [henceforth SLW] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10

<sup>18</sup> SLV 18 / SLW 12

would supplant it with philosophy, this Kierkegaardian history is a history of ideas.<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard wants to arrive at the real Socrates through an idealizing retrospection or an intellectual appropriation of a historical person. He likens the dissertation's task to that of a priest who hears confession. For on the whole, he writes,

philosophy relates to history like a father confessor to a penitent and ought therefore, like the priest, have a sensitive, perceptive ear for the secrets of the penitent but, having listened to the whole sequence of confessions, is then also in a position to make them manifest to the penitent as something else.<sup>20</sup>

The visible is, in this metaphor, superficial and deceptive; it can distract us from the underlying reality we seek to know. In effect, Kierkegaard is then proposing that the philosopher join the likes of Victor Eremita and make hearing his 'most cherished sense'.<sup>21</sup> For, as Eremita puts it his preface to *Either/Or*, just as 'the voice is the disclosure of inwardness incommensurable with the exterior', so 'the ear is the instrument that apprehends this inwardness, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated'. And Eremita continues:

A father confessor is separated by a grillwork from the penitent; he does not see him, he only hears. As he listens, he conjures forth an exterior corresponding to what he hears; thus he encounters no contradiction. It is different, however, when one sees and hears simultaneously but sees a grillwork between oneself and the speaker.<sup>22</sup>

In this capacity, a priest must be a good listener but also something of an artist who conjures forth images that capture the essences of things, revealing their inside.

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<sup>19</sup> Regarding Kierkegaard's positive influence by Romanticism, see David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of the Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (Norwich: SCM Press, 1999), Jørgen Bukdahl, *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001) and Isak Winkel Holm, *Tanken i billedet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> BI 106 / CI 10 (translation modified)

<sup>21</sup> EE1 v / EO1 3

<sup>22</sup> EE1 v-vi / EO1 3 (translation modified)

A number of features of sight and hearing motivate Eremita's choice of metaphor. In his lectures on art, to which we'll return in the next section, Hegel calls both sight and hearing 'theoretical' senses, yet hearing is more 'ideal' than sight, he says, and conveys subjective inwardness rather than external objects.<sup>23</sup> In music, he continues, the ear 'listens to the result of the inner vibration of the body through which what comes before us is no longer the peaceful and material shape' of painting and sculpture, 'but the first and more ideal breath of the soul'.<sup>24</sup> Also language is apprehended through hearing, but while music consists entirely of sounds and their interrelations and does not point to some absent object beyond itself, language is not inherently audible. Sound is a wholly accidental medium for language; in attending to the meaning of words spoken we disregard their sound. Sign language relies on gestures rather than sounds and is no less a language for it. Although there is a poetic and rhetorical use of language that tries to revive the audible medium by calling attention to the sound of words using rhyme and alliteration, this is really a regress toward musicality. The tendency of language is to strip its medium of sensuality. As the fictional author of *Either/Or*'s first volume, 'A', notes in his essay on 'the musical-erotic', the sensuous in language

is reduced to a mere instrument and is thus annulled. If a person spoke in such a way that we heard the flapping of his tongue etc., he would be speaking poorly; if he heard in such a way that he heard the vibrations of the air instead of words, he would be hearing poorly.<sup>25</sup>

Curiously then, sound mediates both what A considers to be the most and the least sensual forms of expression. According to A, music expresses sensuality itself—

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<sup>23</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 890

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> EE1 50 / EO1 67

something Hegel would disagree with.<sup>26</sup> But hearing perceives, in addition to music, what both Hegel and A consider the most spiritual of all forms of expression—language. Still, music and language are both ‘inner’ media in the quite literal sense that they are not based on spatial representation. Whereas visual perception presents surfaces and rays of light located outside us in space, sounds are relatively difficult to place. When an orchestra plays a concert, the music fills the whole room. True, when a person speaks, sight assists hearing in determining that his voice comes from inside his body. Yet what his words *represent* is not the vibrations of his vocal cords but his thoughts—his spirit which, though it appears to be emanating from his body through his voice, is not itself an extended object. ‘Inner’ is a spatial metaphor for the personal and spiritual; but when we consider voice and speech as conveyors of that spirit, the spatial designation can be taken literally. This, then, seems to be why Kierkegaard thinks of hearing as the sense that perceives the inner.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, when Kierkegaard says that Socrates should be understood through hearing and that hearing apprehends spirit through language, he is clearly not saying that we can understand Socrates simply by taking account of the things he says in Plato’s dialogues. Socrates’ words were not transparent to his spirit, according to Kierkegaard; he did not communicate his thoughts directly through his speech. Socrates ‘was not like a philosopher delivering his opinions in such a way that just the lecture itself is the presence of the idea’, Kierkegaard writes; ‘what Socrates said meant something

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<sup>26</sup> EE1 47 / EO1 64. Though Hegel agrees that music is wholly abstract, he associates abstraction with the spiritual inner life rather than sensual desire (Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, p. 891). Kierkegaard also thinks of sensual desire as a kind of inwardness.

<sup>27</sup> Although I am here trying to show a point of continuity between Kierkegaard’s first two books, this is also a good example of how his use of the inner/outer metaphors is inconsistent across works. In *Fear and Trembling*, language is associated with the outward and universal; the inner must be passed over in silence.

different'.<sup>28</sup> As part of his insensitivity to the dramatic aspect of dialogue, Xenophon lacks a sense of how Socrates' way of delivering his lines pointed inward, to his personality. But whereas speech is usually 'a straightforward transmission of thought by way of sound', Socrates' speech 'was not an immediate unity with what was spoken, was not a flowing out but a continual flowing back, and what one misses in Xenophon is an ear for the infinitely resonating reverse echoing of the discourse in the persona'.<sup>29</sup> 'We trust that the readers will agree with our statement', Kierkegaard writes, 'that the empirical determinant is the polygon, that the intuition [*Anskuelsen*] is the circle, and that the qualitative difference between them will continue forevermore'.<sup>30</sup> Xenophon's observation, myopically hung up on particulars and with no ear in Socrates' heart, 'always wanders about in the polygon' and instead of arriving at the higher seeing that is *Anskuelse*, or intuition, only ever finds new angles.<sup>31</sup>

It is 'hearing' that allows the philosopher to square the circle; but just as this is a metaphorical hearing, so too the disregard for a person's exterior for which the confession metaphor calls should not be taken in its most literal sense as, in the case of Socrates, a call to disregard his infamous ugliness in our assessment of his philosophy. Or rather, it should not be taken *merely* literally, for Socrates' appearance should not be considered mere contingent fact. The meaning of Socrates' appearance is irony, because it is not indicative of his personality. It is a phenomenon that is not identical to an essence. Alcibiades already makes this claim when he compares Socrates to a Silenus

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<sup>28</sup> BI 108 / CI 12

<sup>29</sup> BI 114 / CI 18 (translation modified). Hong translates *Replik* 'rejoinder', which makes no sense in this context. Kierkegaard is not interested only in Socrates' replies to his interlocutors' replies. The mention of situation, a key term in Hegel's analysis of drama, signals that Kierkegaard has in mind a comparison to the theatrical, where a *Replik* is a line spoken by an actor onstage.

<sup>30</sup> Following translations of *Anschauung* in Kant's work, I here translate the Danish equivalent, *Anskuelse*, 'intuition'. The root of the word, *skue*, means to see or behold.

<sup>31</sup> BI 117 / CI 21

statue in the *Symposium*, the kind of statue that is hollow and ‘split right down the middle, and inside it’s full of tiny statues of the gods’.<sup>32</sup> The disparity between Socrates’ outside and his inside is a manifestation of his irony, according to Alcibiades,<sup>33</sup> and Kierkegaard agrees that the significance of Socrates’ outward appearance is precisely its insignificance. The truth of his appearance is conjured forth with the help of an idea—irony—and Kierkegaard’s metaphors promise a vision of Socrates based on a recollection that supplants his actual appearance. This is the rather complex way in which the senses serve Kierkegaard and Eremita as metaphors in their respective statements of method. Vision is a model for both the lowest and the highest form of knowledge. Hearing is intermediate between them: it supersedes vision only to achieve a higher form of seeing. A good listener is able to ‘visualize’ the speaker before his mind’s ideal eye. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard in his dissertation wants to say to Socrates what the latter had reportedly said to a prospective disciple: Speak, so that I may see you.<sup>34</sup>

Like Kierkegaard, like Eremita, A concerns himself with persons whose insides are out of joint with their outsides. The women in his essay ‘Silhouettes’ are terminally preoccupied with a grief that does not outwardly manifest itself as such. Sorrow, like irony, ‘seeks to return into itself’.<sup>35</sup> The face is usually a mirror of the soul, A says, and there are people ‘whose make-up is such that when their emotions are stirred the blood rushes to the surface of the skin, and in this way the interior motion becomes visible in

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodfruff in *Plato: Complete Works*, 215b

<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 215b

<sup>34</sup> BI 110fn. / CI 14fn. According to Kenneth Haynes, Erasmus attributed this line to Socrates in an anecdote about a boy who was sent to Socrates by his father in order to have his character and talent assessed. See Kenneth Haynes, ‘Loqvere vt te videam: Towards the Life of an Apophthegm’, *Literary Imagination* 4:2 (2002).

<sup>35</sup> EE1 147 / EO1 169

the exterior'.<sup>36</sup> But then there are persons 'so constituted that the blood recedes, withdraws into the heart chamber and the inner parts of the organism'. The first make-up described, he continues,

is much easier to observe than the second. In the first, one sees the manifestation; the interior motion is visible in the exterior. In the second, one has an intimation of the interior motion. The exterior pallor is, as it were, the interior's good-bye, and thought and imagination hurry after the fugitive, which hides in the secret recesses.<sup>37</sup>

In their quest for sorrow's secret, however, the Symparanekromenoi (as A's philosophical society is called) do not rely on spoken confessions but rather on external cues which are not transparent to their sources in the soul but nonetheless indicate them. The exterior is 'the object of our scrutiny', A says, 'but not of our interest'.<sup>38</sup> The emotional lives they set out to study do not reveal themselves in the natural world.

Nor do persons of this second type therefore lend themselves to portrayal in painting. This follows from assumptions Kierkegaard makes about the nature of representation, assumptions Adorno calls excessively formalist.<sup>39</sup> After all, painting need not be photographically realistic and need not address only the 'outer' eye. But Kierkegaard's point is not that the inside cannot be represented as an outside—that a painting of a human face cannot reveal its subject's character—it is rather that a portrait revealing reflective sorrow would precisely thereby misrepresent its subject matter. It is not merely the case that reflective sorrow is not visible—it is *essentially* invisible, essentially withdraws from the outside world. A visual representation of such sorrow would cancel content by form.

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<sup>36</sup> EE1 147 / EO1 169

<sup>37</sup> EE1 148 / EO1 169

<sup>38</sup> EE1 152 / EO1 174

<sup>39</sup> Adorno, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, p. 17

We will return to Kierkegaard's formalism in the next section; for now, let us grant his assumption that a subject matter that is *essentially* invisible cannot be represented as visible without being falsified. Since A considers portraiture incapable of rendering what he calls 'reflective sorrow', he proposes to describe his subjects in words and indeed uses as examples three characters from the history of opera and literature: Donna Elvira from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Marie Beaumarchais and Margaret from Goethe's *Clavigo* and *Faust*. A wants us to understand the linguistic descriptions he is about to offer by analogy with silhouettes or shadowgraphs which, he says,

are not immediately visible. If I pick up a silhouette, it gives me no impression, does not actually conjure forth any image for me; only when I hold it up toward the wall and do not look at it directly but at what appears on the wall, only then do I see it. So it is with the image I want to show here, an interior image that does not become perceptible until I see through the exterior.<sup>40</sup>

Kierkegaard was clearly intrigued by the idea of indirect visibility. He uses a related image in *The Concept of Irony* to illustrate the inherent difficulty of depicting irony:

There is a work that represents Napoleon's grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again.<sup>41</sup>

If irony is pure negativity, the lack of any substance, then it is a contradiction, Kierkegaard points out, to say that irony is the substance of Socrates' existence. Following his formalist assumptions, he concludes that depicting irony is equally as paradoxical as thinking of irony as a substance. The definitive image of the aesthetic task

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<sup>40</sup> EE1 150-51 / EO1 173 (translation modified)

<sup>41</sup> BI 114 / CI 19

he sets himself in the dissertation is given in his remark that it is as difficult to ‘hold on to the picture’ of Socrates in his irony as it is to depict an elf ‘in the cap that makes him invisible’.<sup>42</sup>

But although strictly speaking sight offers us always a plenitude—there are no gaps in our visual field; any void is itself visible, has shape and color—Kierkegaard’s tree analogy suggests how, in a less strict sense, negativity might appear. Socrates’ speech is like those trees, he writes. ‘One hears his words’, he explains,

in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees. There is not a single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides [*gjemmer*] that which is most important.<sup>43</sup>

A *Gjemme* is, like the secret drawer in Victor Eremita’s desk, a place where something is kept hidden. In that sense the empty space between the trees does not so much conceal Napoleon’s silhouette as contain it. It is there to be revealed to the sophisticated observer. This is the paradox we are circling around: an ideal depiction of Socrates must have content, whereas the object it aims to represent is emptiness itself. The depiction would reveal on the outside that which by its nature is concealed inside.

## 2. Kierkegaard with and against Hegel

Although Adorno identifies Fichte as the ‘archenemy’ of Kierkegaard’s view of the relation between inside and outside,<sup>44</sup> the conventional wisdom holds that it is a sustained

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<sup>42</sup> BI 118 / CI 12 (translation modified)

<sup>43</sup> BI 115 / CI 19

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, p. 29

attack on Hegel. In his notes to Eremita's preface to *Either/Or*, Howard Hong quotes a passage from the *Science of Logic* (1816) whose language Eremita's reflection clearly evokes. The 'activity of force', Hegel writes, 'consists in *expressing itself*', that is,

in sublating externality and determining it as that in which it is identical with itself. Therefore what force in truth expresses is that its relation to other is relation to itself, that its passivity consists in its very activity. [...] In other words, what force expresses is this, that its *externality is identical* with its *inwardness*.<sup>45</sup>

When an object falls to the ground, the force of gravity manifests itself by acting on that object, determining its spatial location. Yet this determination is not some external consequence of gravity but, Hegel would say, identical with it. The passivity of the object that falls and the activity of the force that causes it are but aspects of the same thing. Indeed the physicist would say that the force of gravity here is nothing other than the two objects' mutual pull towards each another. In this regard, there is no distinction between the passive and the active.

This discussion of physics has little apparent bearing on Kierkegaard's claims about inside and outside in his first two books, where these categories pertain to ethics and psychology, and even less on something like Johannes de Silentio's argument that faith is an inwardness that cannot be expressed in language. Trying to explain this mismatch, Stewart concludes in his book *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* that Kierkegaard's 'polemical usage' of the terminology of inner and outer in *Fear and Trembling* is not really an attack on Hegel but rather on the Danish Hegelian, Johan

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<sup>45</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 523

Ludvig Heiberg. Nor does Kierkegaard in his first two books, according to Stewart, have Hegel in mind when he talks about inner and outer.<sup>46</sup>

Stewart could be right about the intended target of Kierkegaard's polemic in *Fear and Trembling*, but certainly Hegel's metaphysics is in the background when Kierkegaard talks about inner and outer in his first two books. Hong's choice of quotation is odd and misleading; odder still is to see someone as well-versed in Hegel's philosophy as Stewart repeat it in his discussion. It is not only in physics that inside and outside are identical for Hegel; the pathos of Hegel's entire philosophy, to borrow Adorno's phrase, is behind an identification of the thing itself and appearance, inside and outside. Consider Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whose title alone expresses the project of identifying inner and outer. In his article on Kierkegaard's Hegelian methodology, Stewart focuses on Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), but there is a continuous engagement in the dissertation also with Hegel's interpretation of Socrates in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1825). Kierkegaard's claim that in Socrates, the inner was not at all in harmony with the outer, and that Socrates 'belonged to the breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point' but 'pointed to something other and opposite' fits right into that debate.<sup>47</sup> In his lectures, Hegel says that Socrates

stands before us as one of those great plastic natures consistent through and through, such as we often see in those times—resembling a perfect classical work of art which has brought itself to this height of perfection.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 326-27

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard rejects several of Hegel's points about Socrates but only mentions Hegel a few times, most notably in his discussion of Socrates as the founder of morality. His claim that irony cannot be considered hypocrisy and that irony is an exercise in abstraction rather than a way of making abstract ideas concrete are prompted by Hegel's claims to the contrary. Cf. BI 330-31; 141 / CI 256; 46; and Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. I, p. 401; 400.

<sup>48</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. I, p. 393

This passage calls for a consideration of Hegel's aesthetics, and it is perhaps in Hegel's philosophy of art that we find the key to Kierkegaard's view of inner and outer, and his philosophical methodology.

In his lectures, Hegel explains that art always consists in 'a unification', one that is 'self-enclosed so as to be a free totality, a unification of the content with its entirely adequate shape'.<sup>49</sup> In the classical era of art, a work of art is not a mere symbol whose significance lies outside of it. Whereas symbolic art points beyond itself, the classical work of art points to itself. The object 'must in art produce its shape out of itself and have the principle of its externality in itself', Hegel says.<sup>50</sup> The artist who shapes an object or otherwise organizes sensuous matter into a whole actualizes a meaning that is latent in the matter. In a classical work of art, spirit reflects on itself, becomes an object for itself, and in 'this objectivity of itself', Hegel says, 'it then has the form of *externality* which, as identical with its own inner being, is therefore on its side the meaning of its own self'.<sup>51</sup>

Also in Romantic art, inside and outside are reflected into one another. Poetry, Hegel says, is

*figurative* because it brings before our eyes not the abstract essence but its concrete reality, not an accidental existent but an appearance such that in it we immediately recognize the essence through, and inseparably from, the external aspect and its individuality.<sup>52</sup>

The perfect work of art is a figure that embodies something ideal or spiritual. The work is an 'outside' that reveals an ideal 'inside'. Kierkegaard's teacher Frederik Sibbern, who had Romantic leanings, characterizes art in a similar way and adds that whereas

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<sup>49</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, p. 427

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427

<sup>52</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, p. 1002

Baumgarten distinguished between sensory knowledge and more abstract or philosophical knowledge, art has now been recognized as a form of knowledge on a par with philosophy.<sup>53</sup> In order to deserve this status, the artist ‘must have an eye’ for the ‘‘inner’ being of things’ and their ‘essential nature’, Sibbern writes.<sup>54</sup> Even as he may appear to add things to his representation by straying from his immediate impression of the object, the artist in fact only gives nature its due when he transfigures it in his work. The representation produced on the basis of such insight is not completely mimetic. It results in ‘an ideal rebirth’.<sup>55</sup>

According to Hegel, it is only drama, the supreme genre of art employing the wholly man-made medium of language, that can represent self-conscious human beings with their rich inner lives, their intentional action and their participation in society.<sup>56</sup> The idea that each art form is uniquely suited to some particular subject matter became a fundamental principle of aesthetic theory with the appearance of Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1766), and Kierkegaard inhaled this kind of thinking from the university lecture halls. What Adorno calls his excessive formalism was born in his perhaps unquestioning adoption of Hegel’s aesthetic theory. The analysis of art in *Either/Or* indeed gives primacy to form, and as Adorno points out, this primacy ‘immediately cancels’ the independence A also wants to ascribe to the contents.<sup>57</sup> Thus in his discussion of Homer in *Either/Or*, A writes that if we say that it was Homer’s good fortune to have come across, in the Trojan War, ‘the most exceptional epic subject matter’,

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<sup>53</sup> Frederik Christian Sibbern, *Om Poesie og Konst*, vol. I (Copenhagen, 1834), p. 4. Hegel would disagree with this: like Baumgarten, Hegel considers philosophy superior to art, abstract thought superior to images.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, Pattison’s translation, in Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 8

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, Pattison’s translation, in Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 8

<sup>56</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, p. 1158f.

<sup>57</sup> Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, p. 17

this can lead one to forget that we always have this epic subject matter through Homer's conception, and the fact it appears to be the most perfect epic subject matter is clear to us only in and through the transubstantiation due to Homer. If, however, Homer's poetic work in permeating the subject matter is emphasized, then one runs the risk of forgetting that the poem would never have become what it is if the idea with which Homer permeated it was not its own idea, if the form was not the subject matter's own form.<sup>58</sup>

Adorno denies here that we could ever abstract from the form and consider a subject matter in isolation. He then goes on to make the stronger claim that for an artist, it is not so much a question of finding an art form that is adequate to a subject matter, but to find the subject matter that already inheres in the form.

What Kierkegaard takes issue with is not Hegel's account of art—far from it—but only the idea that Socrates was already in life a walking work of classical art. He rejects Hegel's interpretation of Socrates as an aesthetic object and insists on a dualism of inside and outside, spirit and phenomenon, both in Socrates and in the world generally. But he agrees with Hegel that these dualisms are canceled in successful works of art. Moreover, he understands his task as a philosopher to be identical to the artist's, in this regard. Adorno's claim about Kierkegaard's stance towards inside-outside discord does not tell the whole story and Adorno is himself aware of this. That is, he registers as an inconsistency on Kierkegaard's part the fact that he, 'who as a philosopher steadfastly challenged the identity of thought and being'—essence and phenomenon—'casually lets existence be governed by thought in the aesthetic object'.<sup>59</sup> This tension is well worth pointing out, but there is in fact no contradiction between believing in a distinction between inside and outside in the world and assigning to art—or philosophy—the task of transcending it.

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<sup>58</sup> EE1 33 / EO1 49-50

<sup>59</sup> Adorno, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, p. 6

### 3. Lover's knowledge

The separation of the inner and the outer comes into a more serious conflict when we consider interpersonal relationships. This conflict is the subject matter of the essay 'Silhouettes', which we have already had occasion to consider. Reflecting anxiously on whether her beloved Clavigo deceived her, Marie Beaumarchais fumbles for a transcendental argument of sorts whereby inside can be deduced from outside. She wants so much to think of unwavering love as a condition for the possibility of all of what her beloved said and did when they were together. His voice, she notes to herself,

was so calm and yet so agitated, it sounded from an inwardness, the depth of which I could scarcely suspect, as if it were breaking a path through masses of rock. Can that voice deceive? What is the voice, then—is it a stroke of the tongue, a noise that one can produce as one wishes? But it must have a home somewhere in the soul; it must have a birthplace.<sup>60</sup>

Marie revolts against the separation of appearance and reality. She is in despair, and it is because of an outside/inside discord. There is pathos in A's portrayal of the Silhouettes and it is, among other things, a pathos for transparency and truth. What these women have lost is the naïve mindset which pre-reflectively assumes that the inner is the outer and the outer is the inner. A's aesthetic-philosophical project can be seen as an attempt to recreate that lost paradise, a world where appearances reveal reality, in the realm of art.

In his papers, A not only describes a series of lovers, but he is himself one. In his attempt to uncover and convey invisible reality, he employs love as a philosophical method. Whereas A says of Margaret that Faust 'has no ear in her heart',<sup>61</sup> A and his Symparanekromenoi are equipped with a 'passion' that 'searches minds and hidden

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<sup>60</sup> EE1 164 / EO1 187-88

<sup>61</sup> EE1 188 / EO1 214

thoughts, conjures forth what is hidden by means of witchcraft and invocations'. This occult passion is 'sympathetic anxiety'<sup>62</sup>—'sympathy with sorrow's secret'.<sup>63</sup> For sorrow, he says, 'sneaks about in the world so very secretively that only the person who has sympathy for it gains an intimation of it'.<sup>64</sup> In his treatment of Antigone, too, A presents love as way of knowing. Though he refers to his modern Antigone as his creation—she is his work of art—it is nonetheless, he says, 'as if in a night of love I had rested with her, as if she in my embrace had confided a deep secret to me, had breathed it out together with her soul'.<sup>65</sup>

This passage is sometimes invoked as evidence that A is identical with Johannes the Seducer—that both are narcissists capable of loving only fantasy women. I think such an identification is mistaken, but for present purposes, what matters is how A's remark testifies to Kierkegaard's attraction to the idea—at once Platonic and Romantic—of something we might call 'lover's knowledge'. Also in his dissertation he swears by a method of inquiry that is grounded in love; and in his quest for the truth about Socrates he models himself first of all on the speaker in the *Symposium* who claims to know the truth about Socrates in virtue of a romantic attachment to him. While the preceding speakers in the *Symposium*, 'like blindman's buffs, groped for the idea, Alcibiades', Kierkegaard writes, 'grasps it with immediate certainty'.<sup>66</sup> The view of Socrates that Alcibiades has gained through his infatuation is the same as Kierkegaard's: also according to Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates, Kierkegaard notes, 'irony is his essential

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<sup>62</sup> EE1 153 / EO1 176

<sup>63</sup> EE1 153 / EO1 175

<sup>64</sup> EE1 152 / EO1 174

<sup>65</sup> EE1 130/EO1 153

<sup>66</sup> BI 142 / CI 47

aspect'.<sup>67</sup> Alcibiades also contributes an aesthetic element to the *Symposium*: in his speech, love is illustrated, made visible [*anskueliggjøres*], in the person Socrates.<sup>68</sup> Alcibiades knows Socrates by acquaintance and, arriving at the sober 'symposium' drunk and sentimental, proceeds to divulge Socrates' essence, an essence he seems confident he knows better than anyone in his audience. He proceeds to tell a story, projecting before his listeners' inner eyes a vision of Socrates as ironic seducer. Let us look for traces of Alcibiades' method in Kierkegaard's own metaphilosophical manifesto.

In an exemplary academic manner, Kierkegaard begins his dissertation by laying out his methodology. He does so by evoking an image of chivalry, a favorite Romantic idea of his.<sup>69</sup> In observing phenomena, such as the historical person Socrates, the 'philosophical knight', Kierkegaard writes, 'must be an eroticist'.<sup>70</sup> This means that, on the one hand,

he must not be indifferent to any feature, any factor. But on the other hand he ought to have a sense of his own predominance—but should use it only to help the phenomenon achieve its full disclosure. Therefore, even if the observer does bring the concept along with him, it is still of great importance that the phenomenon remain inviolate and that the concept be seen as coming into existence through the phenomenon.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> BI 144 / CI 49. Though it should be said that Alcibiades thinks that Socrates' claim to ignorance is pretense, a game he plays in public. If you ever see Socrates 'when he's really serious', Alcibiades says, you will get a glimpse of 'utterly amazing', 'godlike', 'bright and beautiful' statues he keeps hidden within (Plato, *Symposium*, 216d-217a). These treasures of which Alcibiades speaks sound much like Plato's Forms and Kierkegaard's Socrates has no such things inside him. But Alcibiades' Socrates is still an ironist in the sense that his inside is not normally revealed in his outside. He has also robbed Alcibiades of faith in his career though without helping him find an alternative (Plato, *Symposium*, 216ac)—his teaching is negative, not positive.

<sup>68</sup> BI 142 / CI 47 (translation modified). Hong's translation, 'by having love exemplified in the person Socrates', misses the way in which vision is here a metaphor for knowledge.

<sup>69</sup> Regarding the knight as a Romantic trope, see Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 51

<sup>70</sup> BI 105 / CI 9 (translation modified)

<sup>71</sup> BI 105 / CI 9

The phenomenon, in this sexual metaphor, is always, qua phenomenon, ‘of the feminine gender’; and if we expect it to ‘give itself to the stronger on account of its womanly nature’, then the code of chivalry demands of the eroticist in his turn to be respectful of the phenomenon’s integrity so that in applying a concept, he is not an invader and conqueror but a savior and servant.<sup>72</sup>

The metaphysics implied here seems to be that the phenomenon has an essence, and it is this essence that the philosopher must grasp and conceptualize. Just as in Kant’s theory of art, it is nature that must ‘give the rule to art’,<sup>73</sup> so the phenomenon must according to Kierkegaard inspire the philosopher, ‘giving the rule’ to his philosophy. According to Kant, art is not the artist’s entirely free production; a real genius cannot give an account of how he came up with his ideas.<sup>74</sup> He is the passive recipient of natural inspiration. It must be a similar receptiveness that allows the philosopher, on Kierkegaard’s view, to grasp the phenomenon’s essence and express it in a concept. When such a concept is then, in turn, brought to bear on the phenomenon, the concept will appear to come into existence through the phenomenon. By anthropomorphizing the phenomenon, Kierkegaard’s methodological statement also seems to flirt with the idealist view that in becoming intelligible, the phenomenon achieves self-knowledge—just like the penitent when the father confessor tells him what his confession really means.

Despite the Hegelian sound of all this, Tonny Aagaard Olesen and Sylvia Walsh read Kierkegaard’s erotic metaphor as the statement of an ‘anti-Hegelian hermeneutic’,

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* (translation modified)

<sup>73</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 174

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175

as Olesen puts it, behind which ‘one finds an authentic Socratic eroticist and midwife’.<sup>75</sup> Most probably Kierkegaard does have Hegel or Hegelians in mind when he complains about ‘modern philosophy’ and its treatment of phenomena, in which one sometimes hears, he says, too much ‘the jingling of spurs and the voice of the master’.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, as Stewart shows in his paper, as a criticism of Hegel it is largely unwarranted. The master who jingles his spurs is at best a straw-man for Hegel, who in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* articulates an ethos very much like Kierkegaard’s.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, Olesen’s and Walsh’s attempt to fit this metaphilosophical image into a Socratic model has further problems yet. If Kierkegaard’s eroticist is a Socratic midwife, then the concept must be latent in the phenomenon, so that the philosopher does nothing but facilitate its revelation. But although Kierkegaard talks about the phenomenon as a person, ‘she’ cannot necessarily be likened to the young interlocutors Socrates assists in giving birth to ideas, as Olesen and Walsh would have it. The two analogies of knowledge are not easily translated into one another. The phenomenon may have an *essence*, as I have suggested, and bringing that essence out could be compared to midwifery or to the way a penitent’s confession is prompted by the priest. But an essence is not the same as a concept and it is the philosopher knight who is said to ‘bring the concept’ that will express the phenomenon’s essence.

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<sup>75</sup> Tonny Aagaard Olesen, ‘Kierkegaard’s Socratic Hermeneutic in *The Concept of Irony*’, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), p. 112; Walsh, ‘Ironic Love: An Amorist Interpretation of Socratic Eros’, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, pp. 124-25

<sup>76</sup> BI 105 / CI 9

<sup>77</sup> See Stewart, ‘Hegel’s Historical Methodology in *The Concept of Irony*’, pp. 83-90

Moreover it is through abstraction that the philosopher arrives at the phenomenon's essence—he must know to disregard its accidental features or, as Kierkegaard puts it, resist being ‘infatuated by the charms of the particular’; not let himself be ‘distracted by the superabundance of the particular’.<sup>78</sup> That phenomena—such as historical persons—do not already contain concepts on Kierkegaard's view is also suggested by a remark in a draft of the introduction that echoes the Justifying Retrospection and melds the erotic chivalry metaphor with the confession analogy. History by itself is ‘sterile’, Kierkegaard writes, but ‘its embrace is fertile’. ‘In the arms of philosophy’, he continues, ‘history rejuvenates itself unto divine youthfulness’.<sup>79</sup> It is not the phenomenon but the philosopher who gives birth to a concept when he encounters and becomes enchanted with a phenomenon. Kierkegaard's method is not maieutic but erotic and procreative; his philosophical role model here is not first of all Socrates but Alcibiades or Plato.

#### 4. Kierkegaard's speculative philosophy

It is easy to see why Olesen and Walsh should attribute a purely Socratic methodology to Kierkegaard. We are used to thinking of Socrates as Kierkegaard's only philosophical hero. But Kierkegaard also confesses to a ‘youthful infatuation with Plato’ and his metaphilosophy draws heavily on Plato's epistemology, which he characterizes in his dissertation as aesthetic.<sup>80</sup> ‘Plato's sphere is not thought’, Kierkegaard writes, ‘but

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<sup>78</sup> BI 107 / CI 10-11

<sup>79</sup> *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* III B:12, Hong's translation in ‘Supplement’, CI 443.

<sup>80</sup> BI 123 / CI 27

representation' [*Forestilling*];<sup>81</sup> by means of myth, Plato contemplates ideas in sensuous and anthropomorphic guise. In the *Meno*, the myth of the immortal soul helps us imagine how a priori knowledge might be possible. In the *Symposium*, love is contemplated by way of its divine personification, Eros. And the very object of love according to Plato's (Diotima's) theory is beauty—supreme among all things visible. This should come as no surprise, Kierkegaard points out, if we remember that it was from a 'productive life as a poet' that Socrates snatched him.<sup>82</sup>

Isak Winkel Holm views *The Concept of Irony*'s discussion of Plato's myths as a projection of Kierkegaard's own methodology.<sup>83</sup> Yet I think Kierkegaard might see his own epistemology as an improved elaboration upon Plato's rather than a straightforward adoption, insofar as Plato's myths and Forms are pre-reflective and pre-conceptual. The myths are like dreams, Kierkegaard says, and once reflective consciousness awakens, 'it turns out that these mirages were not the idea'.<sup>84</sup> The myths are just the 'preexistence of the idea', the 'unripe fruit of speculation', and this fruit never ripens in Plato's thought, Kierkegaard writes, 'because the dialectical movement is never fully accomplished'.<sup>85</sup> Platonic dialectic 'is not the idea's own dialectic', Kierkegaard writes, probably distinguishing Plato from Hegel.<sup>86</sup> What Kierkegaard pretends to achieve in his dissertation is the synthesis of thought and image that eluded Plato. His idea of Socratic irony is not wholly imagistic. It yields an image only after listening to the essence in the phenomenon and conceiving an idea that is adequate to and reveals that essence. Thus the

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<sup>81</sup> Kierkegaard 1906: 192fn. / Kierkegaard 1989: 103fn. *Forestilling* is equivalent to the German *Vorstellung*.

<sup>82</sup> Kierkegaard 1906: 192-93 / Kierkegaard 1989: 104-5

<sup>83</sup> Isak Winkel Holm, *Tanken i billedet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1998), p. 126

<sup>84</sup> BI 193 / CI 105

<sup>85</sup> BI 193 / CI 105

<sup>86</sup> BI 142 / CI 47

Kierkegaardian image is shot through with thought and in that sense we might say that it marries the Platonic with the Socratic.

Elaborating upon his complaint that Kierkegaard ‘lets existence be governed by thought in the aesthetic object’, Adorno writes that aesthetic ideas, for Kierkegaard, are ‘*universalia post rem*, achieved through the exclusion of historically specific elements’. But artworks, Adorno continues, ‘do not obey the power of the universality of ideas’; ‘concretion is required in every artwork’.<sup>87</sup> It is precisely concretion—flesh and blood—that according to Adorno is missing in Kierkegaard’s fictional characters, such as Johannes the Seducer. He is right that many of Kierkegaard’s personas are but thinly disguised abstract ideas. Consider the fact that, like Eros’ parents Need and Plenty in Diotima’s story, they display their supposed character in their names. To each Johannes is appended a predicate, lest his words and deeds fail to reveal his character and point of view. But it is different with Kierkegaard’s Socrates. Here flesh and blood do not need to be supplied through artistry. History has already supplied a living, breathing Socrates: a phenomenon that precedes a concept.

In *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of the Imagination*, David Gouwens asks whether Kierkegaard envisions a role for the imagination to play in speculative thought.<sup>88</sup> Gouwens despairs of finding it in *The Concept of Irony*, since on his interpretation the rejection of Romanticism in the second part of the book cancels out whatever positive appraisal Kierkegaard seems to make of the imagination as part of the Plato chapter. But Gouwens appears to have looked right past Kierkegaard’s own statement of his philosophical method on the very first page of his dissertation. As we have seen,

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<sup>87</sup> Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, p. 21

<sup>88</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of the Imagination*, pp. 79-81

Kierkegaard conceives of philosophical truth as a kind of intuition or image in which the essence of a phenomenon is revealed through a concept. The validity of a concept is ascertained when it is seen manifested in a phenomenon. To contemplate Socrates' philosophical practice and his relation to his interlocutors, his lovers and his society indeed gives substance to the concept of 'infinite absolute negativity'—a definition of irony so abstract that, taken by itself, it is very difficult to get a grasp on. Likewise the definition, by throwing certain aspects of Socrates into relief, sharpens our view of him.

Perhaps Hermann Diem is right when he says that Kierkegaard's remedy for imagistic Platonic thinking (which Diem thinks 'destroyed' the great advancement on philosophy made by Socrates) is to 'refuse to isolate thought'.<sup>89</sup> Diem looks to *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) where Kierkegaard conceives of the imagination as a creative faculty rather than the faculty of representing sensations. Credited with being the faculty 'in *instar omnium*'—the faculty of faculties—the imagination mediates the collaboration between the other faculties, somewhat like Kant's faculty of judgment.<sup>90</sup> But if what I have tried to show is right, looking for a Kierkegaardian model of speculative philosophy and an improved elaboration upon Plato's philosophy in *The Sickness unto Death* is looking too far. On the basis of Kierkegaard's metaphors of erotic chivalry, confession, and hearing and seeing, we can reconstruct a complete metaphilosophy in *The Concept of Irony* itself.

The measure of philosophical truth is then whether a concept is adequate to a phenomenon and at the same time illuminates what is essential in the phenomenon. In the

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<sup>89</sup> Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. Harold Knight (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), p. 23

<sup>90</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden*, in *Samlede Værker*, vol. XI (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1905), 414 / Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard Hong & Edna Hong, in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 31

introduction to the second part of the dissertation, Kierkegaard calls these two measures by two different names, current in his time: truth and actuality. Looking back upon the first part of the dissertation, he writes that there, ‘the concept always hovered in the background with a continual desire to take shape in the phenomenon’. In the second part,

the phenomenal manifestation of the concept, as a continual possibility to take up residence among us, will accompany the progress of the discussion. These two factors are inseparable, because if the concept were not in the phenomenon, or rather, if the phenomenon were not understandable, actual, only in and with the concept, and if the phenomenon were not in the concept or, more correctly, if from the outset the concept were not understandable, actual, in and with the phenomenon, then all knowledge would be impossible, inasmuch as I in the first case would be lacking the truth and in the second case the actuality.<sup>91</sup>

The erotic gaze of the enchanted philosopher knight synthesizes concept and phenomenon and thereby achieves both truth and actuality.

Although this epistemology is presented as part of a normative metaphilosophy, it can only go so far as a practical guide for the aspiring philosopher. What is it that allows someone to perceive a phenomenon’s essence? How can the observer know which qualities are contingent and should be disregarded? How is the essence of the phenomenon translated into a concept—how is the concept conceived? We are given no criteria for how to get through these crucial turning points. Kierkegaard’s methodological statement explains just as much or just as little as the appeal to inspiration does in art. The moment of insight and the process of conception are occult presences in the theory. The theory of knowledge that Kierkegaard’s methodological-metaphilosophical credo describes may move beyond Platonic imagery; but that statement itself remains, like Diotima’s story of Eros, a myth.

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<sup>91</sup> BI 317-18 / CI 241-42