

A. *Sources*

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# 1

## A Shimmering Socrates *Philosophy and Poetry in Kierkegaard's Platonic Authorship*

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If there is an overarching theme of ancient Greek philosophy, it is the problem of the best life. Although the most famous statement on this subject remains Socrates' enigmatically negative declaration that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (Plato, *Apology* 38a), the fundamental characteristics of the philosophers' approach to this problem—their association of rational inquiry with virtue and happiness, their claim to special knowledge of the hidden nature of reality, and their critical correction of the poetico-religious tradition—were already in place by the sixth century BCE, when Xenophanes of Colophon praised the rational acquisition of "noble wisdom" and reproached Homer and Hesiod for fabricating base lies about the gods. Xenophanes' theology began by exposing the self-serving relativity of the poetic imagination ("Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair"; "horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen") and culminated in the striking declaration that there is a supreme and motionless god, utterly unlike mortals in body and mind, who effortlessly sets all things in motion by thought (Freeman 1948, 22–3, fragments 15, 16, 23–6). His exaltation of the philosophical life and depreciation of the poetic tradition were reflected in the writings of Parmenides and Heraclitus in the fifth century and Plato and Aristotle in the fourth.

However, poetry was not without its champions. No counter-attack was more succinct, or more earth-scorchingly negative, than that of Gorgias, a teacher of rhetoric who argued for the falsehood of the three most basic axioms of philosophy. Recalling the Chaos or infinite abyss from which Hesiod derives all things, Gorgias' book *On Nature* claims that (1) There is nothing; (2) Even if there were something, it could not be known; (3) Even if it could be known, it could not be communicated (Freeman 1948, 128–9). Gorgias' deconstruction of the plenitude of intelligible and articulable being aims to reduce philosophy, at best, to the

mystical silence of purely private experience. If any one of his theses is correct—a possibility that haunts the entire Western philosophical tradition—any positive account of the fundamental nature of reality is radically poetic, in that it produces the “knowledge” that it was supposed merely to have conveyed.

Perhaps no modern philosopher has examined the problem of how to live more deeply and deliberately than Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s understanding of this problem was decisively shaped by his study of the ancient Greeks at the University of Copenhagen. In particular, the dialogues of Plato and the comic dramas of Aristophanes gave him a conceptual and literary vocabulary with which to think and write (more precisely, to think *through* writing) about the human soul and its relationship to the ultimate reality of being or nothingness, God or Chaos. Starting with the dissertation that he defended in 1841, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, Kierkegaard locates the ambiguous polarity of philosophy—is it a disorienting dream of wakefulness, or a path to wisdom and goodness?—in the charged figure of Socrates, around whom storms of controversy have gathered since at least 423 BCE, when Aristophanes’ *Clouds* was produced in Athens. The dissertation reprises the quarrel between the Socratics and the poets that is initiated in the *Clouds* and continued in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the character of Aristophanes is Socrates’ primary antagonist. The *Clouds* depicts Socrates’ students as pale shades of men, starved of physical, spiritual, and emotional nourishment; Socrates himself worships vaporous beings given evanescent form by speech—Clouds, Chaos, Vortex, Aether, Respiration, and Air, shaped by Tongue. In the *Symposium*, however, a deeply hurt Alcibiades—who feels himself a jilted lover and a philosophical casualty of Socrates—nevertheless portrays him as vitally, paradoxically human: his solid carapace of manly virtue turns out to be a womb teeming with images “divine and golden and altogether beautiful and amazing” (*Symposium* 217a). *The Concept of Irony* fuses these opposing views of Socrates into an intrinsically unstable compound. The collapse of Being into Nothing at the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic* generates the dialectical development of Becoming (Hegel 1975, § 85–§ 87); in the same way, the energy produced by the internal oscillation of Socrates between sterile emptiness and fertile substantiality ultimately propels him beyond the Athenian context, and toward a mode of existence associated more with Jerusalem and Rome. For in his later writings, Kierkegaard comes to regard him as an avatar of absolute or unconditioned reality, construes his erotic longing for wisdom as an analogue of the love of the God of Scripture, and finds in his public philosophizing a model for his own role as a gadfly of Christendom.<sup>1</sup>

It must be observed that Kierkegaard’s existential debt to Socrates is inseparable from his literary debt to Plato and Aristophanes. Since antiquity, the name “Socrates” has designated a charismatic and multilayered or “ironic” historical personality who is inaccessible apart from his equally ironic literary representations. Plato, who never speaks in his own voice, depicts Socrates in both performed and narrated dialogues; some of the latter involve complex chains of transmission with multiple opportunities for editorial alteration. In his pseudonymous writings, Kierkegaard transposes Platonic dialogue into another key, producing authors who write or edit their own books and choose their own pen names (cf. SKS 7, 569–71 / CUP1, 625–7). However, there is a more important way in which Kierkegaard’s relationship to the literary Socrates of antiquity recapitulates Plato’s relationship to the historical Socrates. For Kierkegaard as for Plato, contact with Socrates results in a conversion or turning (περιωγή) of the soul toward truth that is achieved through an explosion of poetic and philosophical creativity—a demonstration of Socrates’ pedagogical

potency that implicitly resolves the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (*Republic* 518c, 607b).

Let me elaborate. An obscure and ambiguous pronouncement in Plato’s *Second Letter* presents his authorship in the form of a riddle: “there are no writings of Plato, nor will there ever be, but those now said to be his are of a Socrates grown beautiful [or ‘noble’] and young” (*Second Letter* 314c). The clear implication of this statement, which Kierkegaard echoes when he asserts that “in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me” (SKS 7, 570 / CUP1, 626), is that Plato’s writings are *by* a rejuvenated and ennobled Socrates as well as about him—but what does this mean? One might reply that, having been permanently and profoundly transformed by his relationship with the historical Socrates, Plato poetically produces the Socrates whom we find in the dialogues. Yet this formulation divides what Plato suggests is an organic and developing whole. In attributing his writings to a young and beautiful Socrates, Plato binds subject and object, activity and passivity, into a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Any attempt to explain his authorship in terms of a non-Platonic Socrates—or a non-Socratic Plato—is therefore a dead end. Plato’s Socrates is the literary production of Socrates’ Plato; to the extent that each is the offspring of the other, one might say that Plato and Socrates combine to give birth to themselves in the dialogues.

Kierkegaard relates to the provocatively ambiguous Socrates whom he observes through the binocular lenses of Plato and Aristophanes in a precisely analogous way. Socrates is a living presence in his writings, and not simply in the sense that he grows or develops over the course of the authorship. In remaining open to the mystery of Socrates, in continuing to chart depths of meaning beneath the surface of his irony, Kierkegaard lets himself be transformed by what he comes to understand—which is to say that he learns Socratically (cf. *Republic* 490a–b). Gorgias claims that nature (φύσις, from φέω, “to beget, produce, bring forth”) is an abyss, and that what the philosophers mistake for Being is Nothing; for Kierkegaard, however, the effective reality of Socrates is his potentiation of spiritual creativity and growth. Kierkegaard writes in 1848 that Socrates “was no Christian, that I know, although I also definitely remain convinced that he has become one” (SKS 16, 36 / PV, 54). Kierkegaard’s Socrates flows from the pen of Socrates’ Kierkegaard; the rejuvenated author and his literary creation are from the outset united in the circle of an essential relationship. And it is in this fecund circle of (self-)discovery and (self-)invention—a unique repetition of Plato’s relationship with Socrates—that philosophy and poetry join to produce a literary vehicle of extraordinary intellectual and spiritual expansion.

Plato says that “the beginning is the most important part of every work” (*Republic* 377a). Kierkegaard’s authorship, and in a fundamental sense his life, begins with Socrates; *The Concept of Irony*, his first major philosophical and literary accomplishment, has been aptly described as “not so much a requirement for a Magister degree as ... a program for life ... not the solution to a scholarly problem but a *life task*.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter traces the birth of Kierkegaard’s Socrates in his dissertation and the developing significance of Socrates in Kierkegaard’s major pseudonymous writings.

### 1.1 Socrates in *The Concept of Irony*

Kierkegaard’s dissertation reveals the truth of irony to be an existence form rather than, as its title would seem to announce, a theoretical structure. Its most important teaching consists not in an argument, but an enactment—a demonstration of erotic attunement to

the soul of Socrates, and thus of the ethical openness to other individuals that is essential to Socratic philosophizing. *The Concept of Irony* is itself ironic, in that “the outer” is not “the stopping point” but indicates “something other and opposite” (SKS 1, 74 / CI, 12). On its surface, it is a sober, scholarly inquiry into the nature of the historical Socrates that uses the writings of Socrates’ contemporaries as tools of triangulation. By way of analogy, Kierkegaard mentions a picture in which a ghostly image of Napoleon emerges from the empty space between some trees that shade his grave (SKS 1, 80–81 / CI, 19); in just this way, we may come to know Socrates only indirectly. However, there is more to this image than meets the eye. In the picture of Napoleon, background and foreground alternate and cannot be pinned down; similarly, the “trees” that limn Socrates—the writings of his most gifted contemporaries—spring from seeds that he himself has sown. Kierkegaard furthermore prunes from this lush literary garden the contributions of Xenophon, who in his opinion has neither eyes nor ears for the real nature of Socrates—the daimonic being who is somehow both background and foreground, originating inspiration and poetic product, of the thought of Plato and Aristophanes. Kierkegaard’s inquiry is thus something other than objective or scientific research. Just as we are able to discern the outline of Napoleon between the trees only because we are *already* familiar with what we take to be his image, Kierkegaard poetically conjures forth a Socrates who answers to a complex intuition born from the combination of enthusiasm and reflection with which he approaches the ancient sources (cf. SKS 1, 244 with 89 / CI, 198 with 27). Like the “poetic image” in which Plato unconsciously shrouds “historical actuality,” Kierkegaard’s Socrates rises “transfigured from the grave to an ... intimately shared life” (SKS 1, 92 / CI, 30).

Although Kierkegaard declares that Aristophanes “has come very close to the truth in his depiction of Socrates” (SKS 1, 65 / CI, 6), he begins with an extended discussion of Plato, starting with the *Symposium*.<sup>3</sup> In their representations of Socrates, Kierkegaard writes, “Plato has the *tragic ideality*, Aristophanes *the comic*” (SKS 1, 180 / CI, 128). What this means is illuminated by a remark in *Postscript*:

What lies at the root of both the comic and the pathos-filled [the tragic] is the misrelation, the contradiction between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the becoming .... When the subjective existing thinker turns his face towards the idea, his interpretation of the misrelation is pathos-filled; when he turns his back to the idea, allowing it to shine from behind into the same misrelation, his interpretation is comic. (SKS 7, 88–9 / CUP1, 90–91)

In Kierkegaard’s presentation of Socrates, the comic qualifies the tragic; a plus is followed by a minus. If Plato sees Socrates from “beneath” as striving nobly toward the infinity of the idea, Aristophanes, viewing him from “above,” observes the ridiculous inability of his thought to achieve any actual results whatsoever. If Plato looks up at Socrates in a mood of divine madness, Aristophanes looks down in sobriety. Plato’s “youthful ardor” caused him to see Socrates as “*an immediate conveyor of the divine*”—a “spring of eternal life” analogous to Christ, who affected others “partly in a communication of life and spirit” and “partly in a release of the individual’s locked-up powers,” or, in another formulation, as “the word that creates or the silence that begets and gives birth to the individual” (SKS 1, 90, 91 / CI, 29, 30). The “corrective” viewpoint of Aristophanes (SKS 1, 179 / CI, 128) effectively arrests Socrates’ (or Plato’s) daimonic ascent to truth and being, leaving him hovering in the empty space between earth and heaven, human actuality and divine ideality. In the myth that Aristophanes tells in Plato’s *Symposium*, Zeus punishes the spherical proto-humans who

storm the heavens by cutting them in two (*Symposium* 190d); this is, among other things, a deliberate echo of the blow that Aristophanes deals Socrates in the *Clouds*.

According to Kierkegaard, the *Clouds* reveals “the cryptic nothing that is the point of Socrates’ life” (SKS 1, 203 / CI, 153), a nothing in which he nonetheless achieves equanimity. The chorus of *Clouds*, the “aeriform reflection” of Socrates’ “hollow interior,” “symbolizes the whole empty, meaningless activity” of his school (SKS 1, 184 / CI, 133). Capable of resembling all things but “not actually being them,” the *Clouds*—Socrates’ gods—embody “the purely negative dialectic that continually remains in itself, [and] never goes out into the qualifications of life or the idea” (SKS 1, 185, 186 / CI, 134, 135). Socrates ultimately worships “the formless vapor mass” that “remains when the various cloud forms are allowed to vanish” (SKS 1, 187 / CI, 137). “There is thus a very profound harmony between the clouds as the objective power that cannot find an abiding place on earth ... and the subject, Socrates, who floats above the earth in a basket and struggles to rise into these regions” (SKS 1, 188 / CI, 138; cf. *Clouds* 218). Socrates’ aerial suspension furthermore reflects his “complete isolation,” for although he has pupils, “he is not involved in any relationship with them ... [but] continually hovers freely above them, enigmatically attracting and repelling” (SKS 1, 196 / CI, 146).

Following Aristophanes, Kierkegaard depicts Socrates as traversing a diffuse boundary zone. He has a “duplexity of existence” similar to that of the “flying fish” (SKS 1, 78 / CI, 16), an animal that moves exclusively in the fluid media of air and water. His irony “breaches the bastion that separates the waters of heaven and of earth,” a point “just as hard to fix as the point between thawing and freezing” (SKS 1, 136 / CI, 78). Like the mythical Charon, who ferried dead shades to the afterworld, Socrates “shipped individuals from reality to ideality,” steering them “out upon the Oceanus ... [of] ideal infinity” (SKS 1, 178, 277 / CI, 126, 236); his “infinite negativity” was a “gale wind” that swept the Sophists into uncharted waters (SKS 1, 262 / CI, 218). At first sight, these analogies seem to underscore the insubstantiality and emptiness of the Socratic dialectic, which carries the interlocutor out of actuality but never arrives at solid ground. Yet over the course of *The Concept of Irony*, they come to suggest the ambiguous potentiality of Socratic liberation.

In the book’s second chapter, Kierkegaard reverses Cicero’s famous assertion that Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens; rather, like a kind of anti-Charon, he “brought people out of their houses and up from the netherworld in which they lived” (SKS 1, 228n / CI, 181n). Does Socrates draw one up, or drag one down? In fact he does both. Just as the ship’s captain does not know which of the passengers he has benefited by not letting them be drowned, Socrates himself could not say whether “the instruction by which he transferred individuals from one part of the world to another” would help them or harm them (SKS 1, 234 / CI, 186). In any case, Socrates was “an amorist of the highest order, [and] had an extraordinary enthusiasm for knowledge” (SKS 1, 235 / CI, 188). This enthusiasm, “a consuming zeal in the service of possibility” (SKS 1, 239 / CI, 192), did not, we are now told, “distance him from life—on the contrary, he was in very lively contact with it, but his relation to it was his purely personal relation to individuals” (SKS 1, 228 / CI, 180). What is more, these individuals were “of infinite importance” to him (SKS 1, 228 / CI, 181). This Socrates, who “helped the individual to an intellectual delivery ... [and] cut the umbilical cord of substantiality” (SKS 1, 238 / CI, 191), answers to Plato’s conception of him as a midwife and as a practitioner of philosophical pederasty, “referring, of course, to youth’s first awakening from the sleep of childhood and the coming to oneself” (SKS 1, 91n / CI, 29n). Nor can the philosophical midwife or pederast be adequately conceived in isolation

from others, as Aristophanes conceives Socrates. For in these roles, Socrates stands in an essential relationship to young men—one in which he attempts to guide them across the threshold of adulthood (cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 149a–51d).

In the third chapter of *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard explores the necessity of Socrates' irony from a world-historical viewpoint. Whereas Socrates is the “hidden and cryptic source” of many noisy schools of followers, “we do not hear him at all” (SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198). Socrates “is like a dash in world history” (SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198)—a semantic nothing that nonetheless functions essentially as a means of connecting linguistically significant elements. He “exists and yet again does not exist” (SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198); his significance is “to be and yet not to be, or not to be and yet to be: he is the nothing from which the beginning must nevertheless begin” (SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198). Viewed historically, Socrates oscillates between absence and presence, plenitude and emptiness, much like the ghostly image of Napoleon. But, for Kierkegaard, this internal excitation is pregnant with possibility: our ignorance about Socrates is “an invitation not so much to bypass him as to conjure him forth with the aid of the idea, to make him visible in his ideal form” (SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198). And what Kierkegaard conjures forth in the remainder of the dissertation is a Socrates whose divine mission or divine calling (cf. SKS 1, 222 / CI, 175) is precisely to *be* a beginning, not simply of the appearance of subjectivity in world history (SKS 1, 302 / CI, 264), but “an infinite beginning that contains within itself a multiplicity of beginnings” (SKS 1, 261 / CI, 216–17)—of what, he does not and cannot know, inasmuch as his position is “the possibility of everything, of the whole infinity of subjectivity” (SKS 1, 260 / CI, 215).

Seen from one angle, Socrates cannot be understood in isolation from others: a beginning is identity dependent on what comes next, and so is essentially incomplete when considered in itself. Seen from another angle, he is splendidly indifferent to the question of what begins from him, or whether anything at all does so. Is Socrates self-enclosed and independent—rounded off like a sphere with a smooth, seamless surface, to borrow an image from the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*? Or can one detect in him the wound of incompleteness and erotic neediness? Is he a faithful lover of restless young souls, or a cruel deceiver? Kierkegaard tries to embrace all of these alternatives in presenting Socrates as a touchstone of individual identity. Socrates' completeness, he suggests, consists in the fullness of his actual and potential relationships to others, relationships made possible precisely insofar as he withholds himself from others in the mode of irony. For his silence solicits a range of responses in and through which subjective existing individuals may define and declare themselves. It is here, in the space between neediness and repletion, that Kierkegaard's shimmering Socrates comes into view—an ethical Socrates who may seduce us or guide us (cf. SKS 1, 355 / CI, 327), but who in any case pays us back in our own coin.

## 1.2 Shades of Socrates: *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*

Kierkegaard's discussion of Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* involves two closely related problems—or rather, two dimensions of a single problem—that come to play a central role in his pseudonymous authorship. The first is the sense that life's real meaning and fulfillment can be experienced only vicariously.<sup>4</sup> This problem is introduced in Plato's *Symposium* by Apollodorus, who believes that everyone besides Socrates is miserable, and echoed by Alcibiades, who is trapped by the conviction of his own intractable worthlessness in comparison with Socrates' surpassing excellence (*Symposium* 173d–e, 215e–16a).



The second problem presupposes the first: it is the possibility that the existence of the ostensibly more vital other to whom the unhappy one is naturally drawn might *itself* turn out to be empty and insubstantial. Alcibiades remarks that the bite of Socrates on the heart or soul is much more painful than that of a snake, and induces a “philosophical and Bacchic madness” (*Symposium* 218a); Kierkegaard takes this a step further, initially portraying Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* as a vampire who infects his lovers with the sickness of unrequited longing. The vampire’s bite, unlike that of the snake, can scarcely be felt; while drawing out the lifeblood of his lover—and therewith turning him, too, into a vampire—the ironist “has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep, and tormented him with troubled dreams” (SKS 1, 110 / *CI*, 49). This demonic image suggests that Socrates may be a deceiver of the deepest sort: a *metaphysical* seducer, who thrives on the beautiful longing that he induces by intimating a reality in himself, and at the heart of the world, that does not exist.

Kierkegaard’s earliest pseudonymous works, *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* (both published in 1843), are authored, in whole or in part, by individuals who revolve around another’s unobtainable vitality and fullness of being. Thus does A in the first part of *Either/Or*, “like a ghost [who] prowls night and day around something I cannot enter,” relate to the immortal creativity of Mozart and the irrepressible sensuousness of Don Giovanni, a nobleman whose hereditary title and warrant—*giovani, iuvenis*, juvenile—is Youth (SKS 2, 56 / *EOI*, 49); thus does Johannes de Silentio look longingly toward the “guiding star” of Abraham (SKS 4, 117 / *FT*, 21), who by means of faith “preserves an eternal youth” even in the face of God’s demand that he cut his son’s throat, drain his blood, and burn him (SKS 4, 115 / *FT*, 18). Both authors, moreover, seem fixed in their cold and distant orbits. While Silentio is intellectually “convinced that God is love,” he also asserts that “for me, God’s love, both in the direct and the converse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality” (SKS 4, 129 / *FT*, 34). Ideally or in thought, God is love; actually, God is as absent as a dead-beat father. For Silentio, God hovers, self-enclosed, beyond the world; like Socrates, He “exists and yet again does not exist” (SKS 1, 244 / *CI*, 198).<sup>5</sup> Yet God’s inconceivability compromises even Silentio’s merely ideal relationship with Him. Silentio cannot understand how “Father Abraham” could endure the commanding presence of a morally absent God—a terror to the heart and a paradox to the mind—with such vigor as to become the spiritual and biological progenitor of multitudes.<sup>6</sup> What is more, it rankles that he is able to do so: Abraham is a thorn in Silentio’s side, much as Socrates is in Alcibiades’, and both men pursue similar strategies in attempting to excuse their moral and spiritual incapacities. By insisting that Socrates can be compared only to satyrs, who are immortal, Alcibiades effectively places him out of the reach of human aspiration (*Symposium* 221d); Silentio does the same when he poetically elevates Abraham to the status of a hero so great as to be incomprehensible and therefore inimitable (SKS 4, 112–13 / *FT*, 15–17).<sup>7</sup>

Kierkegaard’s personal alphabet of human psychology could be said to begin with the character of A, who gives voice to the modern and postmodern anxiety that a purely literary life is, in the end, no life at all. A occasionally publishes reviews, but attaches very little value to academic writing, abandoning in a drawer essays on aesthetics, psychology, and culture that more than a few professors would pay dearly to have authored. The root of the problem is that A relates essentially to existential models that subsist exclusively in music, drama, and literature, and so may be suspected of having only as much substance as emotion and imagination can lend them. His obsession with the opera *Don Giovanni* and its composer is a romantic analogue of Silentio’s obsession with Abraham and God. His sympathy for jilted women like Mozart’s Donna Elvira hearkens back to Alcibiades’ experience with Socrates

and echoes the theme of emotional and moral orphanhood in the story of Abraham and Isaac that resonates so strongly with Silentio. A's isolation is profound: he writes scholarly lectures on seduction and unhappiness for an imaginary society of *Συμπαρανεκρωμένοι*, "corpses collecting alongside one another" (SKS 2, 137 / EOI, 137). Both haunted and haunting, he resembles the ghost of *Don Giovanni's* Commendatore, who, he asserts, "is consciousness," and who returns to pass judgment on the seducer who robbed him of his life (SKS 2, 126–7 / EOI, 124–5). A thus exemplifies the full scope of the problem that Kierkegaard associates with spiritual vampirism.

Don Giovanni and his reflective double—the seducer who, lacking the irresistible magnetism of the musical erotic, is obliged to rely on the "power of words" (SKS 2, 103 / EOI, 99)—are uncannily familiar. Don Giovanni possesses a power of "omnipotence" and "life" (SKS 2, 105 / EOI, 101); he "bursts out of the abyss of earnestness" like "lightning" (SKS 2, 106 / EOI, 103). His full-throated passion, like the creative speech of Yahweh, "sets in motion the passion of the others," but "compared with his life, the lives of all the others are only derived" (SKS 2, 121 / EOI, 119); he is the "sun" around which these "dark bodies" revolve, just as A revolves around Mozart (SKS 2, 126; cf. 56, 59 / EOI, 123, cf. 49, 51). And yet, the love that he arouses is unreciprocated; his lovers are bereft. Don Giovanni's homonymous double is Johannes the seducer, whose diary of heartless erotic conquest and abandonment A steals from a partially open drawer and reads with anxiety and trembling (SKS 2, 293 / EOI, 303). Johannes, who "discarded" his conquests "as trees shake off their leaves—he was rejuvenated, the foliage withered," was "much too endowed intellectually to be a seducer in the ordinary sense" (SKS 2, 296, 297 / EOI, 306, 308). By turns "wild and passionate" and coldly cerebral, he sometimes appeared "as the one seduced" (SKS 2, 297, 299 / EOI, 308, 309). The deceived Cordelia describes him as a cloud in a kingdom of mist, a matchless musical instrument, and the source of every thought that she thinks (SKS 2, 299 / EOI, 309–10). All of this is reminiscent of the unfaithful Socrates whom Kierkegaard conjures from his reading of the ancients in the first chapter of *The Concept of Irony*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, "The Seducer's Diary" is concerned with the seductiveness of the written word even more than the one that is spoken or sung; this is brought home by the fact that A obtains and reads Johannes' diary only because he capitulates to the temptation of illicit literary voyeurism.

A deftly conveys the manic and depressive experience of metaphysical seduction in an analogy drawn from the theater, that of "the stage proper and the stage one sometimes sees behind it" (SKS 2, 295 / EOI, 306). "Through a hanging of fine gauze," he writes, "one sees, as it were, a world of gauze, lighter, more ethereal, with a quality different from that of the actual world" (SKS 2, 295–6 / EOI, 306). In this striking image, actual human existence is a stage set, a cardboard mock-up; thus does A, on coming to adulthood, regard as insipid fanfaronade the presumed virtues and values of Denmark's Christian burghers (cf. SKS 2, 43 / EOI, 34). Yet like Don Giovanni's love songs and Johannes' love letters, books offer only illusory transcendence: those who enter the world behind the stage, drawn by a misty intimation of ideality made luminous by youthful desire, find nothing but a clutter of boards and rope and exposed wires—the rough machinery of dissimulation. For A, all literary prophets resemble the Sophist whom Plato describes as a fisher of men, who snags erotically restless souls using as bait phantasms or simulacra of beings—poetic constructions posing, like delicately tied flies, as vital natures (*Sophist* 234b–c). "What philosophers say about actuality," A observes, can be as disappointing as "a sign in a secondhand shop: Pressing Done Here. If a person were to bring his clothes to be pressed, he would be duped, for the sign is merely for sale" (SKS 2, 41 / EOI, 32).

Kierkegaard's own anxieties about reading and writing are surely reflected in the story that introduces *Either/Or*. Having fallen in love with a writing desk, Victor Eremita takes it home and deposits cash in its money drawer; enraged when the drawer does not open, he strikes the desk with a hatchet (SKS 2, 12–13 / *EOI*, 5–6). This parable of unrequited love and wounded pride, a motif that runs throughout *Either/Or*, concerns in particular the apparent fruitlessness of the erotic investment of authorship. Nevertheless, the hatchet blow does yield a debased kind of intellectual currency: it pops open the door to a secret compartment that holds the papers of A and the letters of B, as the editor Eremita designates Judge William. The judge is by all appearances solidly rooted in the bourgeois world that A derides; he longs for no higher reality, but rather seeks to convert the wayward A to his own thoroughly respectable example of marriage, work, and worship. Yet between the lines of his exceedingly lengthy letters, unanswered labors of love, one may read the vain and anxious hope of obtaining from A an explicit confirmation of the goodness of his way of life. Eremita at any rate places A's and B's papers in a box designed to hold dueling pistols; a desperate pride, in other words, compels each to take aim at the existence of the other, as though, Cain-like, they might win some sense of worth through literary fratricide. What would it take to break open this vicious circle of neither/nor?

The answer is symbolically contained in Eremita's attack on the writing desk, a shivering blow from above that resonates with Zeus' mythical punishment of our hybristic ancestors and God's destruction of the Tower of Babel. The shock of an encounter with the absolute or its avatars can produce explosive and irremediable fragmentation; thus the psyche of Alcibiades, driven by an unstable combination of θυμός (aggressive spiritedness) and ἔρως (love)—his blazon was “Eros bearing a thunderbolt” (Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 16.2)—splits apart against the rock of Socrates' existence, a seamless harmony of speech and deed, understanding and action. However, the shock may also open a soul to the experience of a transcendent goodness. Eremita notes that he struck the desk just as Xerxes whipped the sea (SKS 2, 13 / *EOI*, 6). In *Judge for Yourself!*, Kierkegaard compares the radically sobering impression of “the unconditioned” to the terrible lash that the royal coachman, standing high in his box, brings down on a high-spirited horse in order to make it concentrate every trembling muscle on standing still. The fiery animal, for whom “stand[ing] still is an act, an effort, the greatest” (SKS 16, 164 / *JFY*, 108), learns one fundamental thing from the royal coachman's whip: “who it is who wields the lash” (SKS 16, 164 / *JFY*, 107). A journal entry from 1843 suggests that the experience of writing *Either/Or* similarly, but more mysteriously, opened Kierkegaard up to a deeply humbling and saving impression of truth:

*My Judgment on Either/Or*

There was a young man, happily gifted as an Alcibiades. He lost his way in the world. In his need he looked about for a Socrates but among his contemporaries found none. He then begged the gods to transform him himself into one. But look! He who had been so proud of being an Alcibiades became so humbled and mortified by the grace of the gods that when he had received just what could make him proud, he felt humbler than all (SKS 18, 157, JJ:54 / *KJN* 2, 146).

Alcibiades was dealt a full house of physical beauty, manly virtue, noble birth, powerful connections, and wealth, but he longed for something more. A needy and drifting Kierkegaard, as passionate and courageous as any Alcibiades, could find no Socrates, no measure adequate to his soul, in the cave of contemporary culture. This is the lesson that he seems to have learned in thinking through the small, closed world of A and B. With importunate

ambition and desire—a kingly pair of steeds, fit to follow the flight of a god (cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a–9d)—he begged to become the Socrates whom he had come to know through reading and writing. His wish was granted; his soul was struck by a new sight of truth. His old ghosts having been exorcised, a noble and new Socrates would be midwifed in Johannes Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846). However, Kierkegaard's erotic expansion was accompanied by the contraction and compression of a reverent shame; now fully open to the enormity of the divine, he felt the sober weight of the absolute responsibility to live, Socratically, in and for the truth.

### 1.3 Socrates as Faithful Philosopher: *Fragments* and *Postscript*

Climacus strikes a happier and more confident tone than his forlorn and anxious authorial predecessors. This new Johannes, “John of the Ladder” (from the Greek κλίμαξ), doubts not the truth that Socrates sought—the essential, eternal truth about how to live—but asks rather what it is, and by what passion it might be attained. Can erotic ascent on the ladder of intellect deliver us from ignorance and vice? Or must the truth, moved by love if not by need, climb down to us? Is the truth a structure of being or a living person? Climacus presents this as the alternative of philosophy or faith, Socrates or God incarnate—both being paths onto which no other can lead one, because “I can discover my own untruth only by myself” (SKS 4, 223 / PF, 14). Climacus therefore dances alone; unlike the decentered authors of *Either/Or*, he stands for his own witness and stakes only his own life (SKS 4, 217 / PF, 7–8). In this he follows Socrates, who “had the courage and self-collectedness to be sufficient unto himself,” and the “rare magnanimity,” in philosophizing “just as absolutely with whomever he spoke,” never to be “an authority” but merely “a midwife” for others, “an occasion” for them to learn the truth on their own (SKS 4, 219–20 / PF, 9–10).

*Fragments* repeats a familiar Kierkegaardian pattern: it begins by setting up a polar opposition. Philosophy and faith regard one another as “untruth”—not merely “outside” the truth, but “polemical against” it (SKS 4, 224 / PF, 15). Philosophy assumes that the truth is latent in each of us, and need only be “recollected” through our own individual efforts; faith assumes that sin has caused human beings to lose the condition for understanding the truth, which must be given by “the god.” For faith, the assumption that we can learn the truth without divine assistance is a prideful delusion; for philosophy, the absolutely paradoxical premise of faith—the incarnation of the eternal, infinite, universal truth in a time-bound, finite, and particular human form—is an absurdity that offends the understanding. Nevertheless, Socrates cannot be constrained within this rigid opposition; his resistance to its categories produces what David Possen describes as *Fragments*' “controlled argumentative implosion” (Possen 2010, 39).

Climacus' Socrates is so erotically alive that he begins to migrate toward faith from the instant he is introduced. Philosophy assumes that we can discover the truth on our own, but in *Fragments*, as in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates relates essentially to “the god” (SKS 4, 219 / PF, 10)—his name, uttered in ignorance of further particulars, for the deity who speaks at Delphi and the divinity who compels him to midwife young souls (*Apology* 21b, *Theaetetus* 150c). What is more, he is so far from being offended by the hypothesis of faith that it is he to whom Climacus presents himself for inspection at the end of *Fragments* (in “The Moral,” SKS 4, 306 / PF, 110). Climacus' Socrates is both rooted in, and retrospectively illuminates, the Platonic dialogues. To read the *Apology* from the perspective of

*Fragments* is to see that the ultimate warrant for Socrates' philosophizing is a divine authority that he accepts on faith and without argument. Socrates would not have bothered to inquire into the meaning of the oracle had he not presupposed that the Delphic god knew what he was talking about. "Surely he [the god] is not saying something false," he reasons in pondering the Delphic oracle's puzzling assertion that no one is wiser than he, "for that is not sanctioned for him" (*Apology* 21b). The god thus arouses, focuses, and validates his entire philosophical quest—a quest dedicated to answering the questions "Who is Socrates?" and "What is wisdom?"

Kierkegaard writes in his dissertation that Socrates "was ignorant of the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine—that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was" (SKS 1, 217 / *CI*, 169). Climacus takes this insight a step further: it is precisely because his erotic openness brings him into an essential relationship with this ground that Socrates, "a connoisseur of human nature," nevertheless claimed not to know himself (cf. *Phaedrus* 229e). "This seems to be a paradox," he writes. "But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow" (SKS 4, 242–3 / *PF*, 37). In Climacus' account, Socrates stakes his life on what he cannot know; he ultimately comes to see that what he calls "the god" is a paradox that admits of no resolution because it is absolute. The *Postscript* defines "the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person," as "objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness" (SKS 7, 186 / *CUP1*, 203); by this criterion, which is also "a paraphrasing of faith," Socrates was "in the truth in the highest sense within paganism" (SKS 7, 187 / *CUP1*, 204). What, then, is the difference between Socratic or philosophical *eros* and Christian faith? In both cases "the striving is infinite, that is, directed toward the infinite, is a process of infinitizing," yet Climacus insists that the difference between them is also "infinite" (SKS 7, 91, 189–90n / *CUP1*, 92, 206n). Perhaps one could picture the two as curves converging asymptotically as they run to infinity on each side of the *y*-axis of a Cartesian plane—never touching the meridian, but drawing ever closer to one another over an infinite distance.<sup>9</sup> This is in any case a serviceable image of the powerful upward deflection of Kierkegaard's erotic passion as he rushes to meet the shimmering existence communication of Socrates in the mirror of his authorship.

#### 1.4 A Brief Conclusion

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard writes that irony "emerged [in Socrates] ... totally and in all its infinity, whereby it finally sweeps Socrates away with it" (SKS 1, 262 / *CI*, 218). A Socrates consumed or overwhelmed by irony would appear to furnish evidence for the ultimate victory of poetry over philosophy. In the *Postscript*, however, Climacus asserts that "Socrates was an ethicist ... bordering on the religious" who used "irony as his incognito" (SKS 7, 456 / *CUP1*, 503). Was Socrates a master of irony, or was he mastered by it? While Kierkegaard invites this question, he also indicates that it is unanswerable. In and by himself, Socrates is inaccessible; in coming to grips with his irony, we necessarily encounter ourselves. Like Socrates' other faithful lovers, Kierkegaard finds himself in a relationship that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, one in which production and discovery flow in both directions. Nor could one easily imagine a Socrates who did not straight-facedly observe that we ought to be more concerned with the condition of our own souls than with

his. Kierkegaard's lifelong engagement with Socrates is the paradoxical proof that he took this lesson deeply to heart. I hope to have shown that Kierkegaard's Socrates and Socrates' Kierkegaard move hand in hand from the shadows of an aesthetic existence into the presence of ethical and religious truth. In just this way, the writings of the Danish master of irony furnish a Socratic occasion to measure our own anxieties about, and readiness for, spiritual expansion and growth.<sup>10</sup>

### Cross-references

See also CHAPTER 5, "KIERKEGAARD AND EXISTENTIALISM: FROM ANXIETY TO AUTONOMY"; CHAPTER 6, "POSTMODERNISM AND DECONSTRUCTION: PARADOX, SACRIFICE, AND THE FUTURE OF WRITING."

### Notes

The author would like to thank Alvaro Valls for inviting him to present an earlier version of this chapter at his 2013 conference, "Kierkegaard—200 Years Later."

- 1 This last leads Muench to declare that "the single most important text for Kierkegaard's thinking about Socrates is Plato's *Apology*" (Muench 2010, 7). But the life drama whose last act is the Christian gadfly begins for Kierkegaard in an encounter with the *Symposium*.
- 2 Hans Frederik Helveg in *Dansk Kirketidende* 51:829–30, quoted in Aagaard Olesen 2001, 102–3, emphasis in original.
- 3 On the ancient and modern background of Kierkegaard's consideration of Aristophanes, see Ziolkowski 2010.
- 4 Cf. the discussion of the "unhappy consciousness" in Hegel 1977, §§ 206–30.
- 5 De Silentio's simultaneous affirmation and denial of the titles "philosopher" and "poet" (SKS 4, 103, 180 / FT, 7, 90) are a human reflection of this fundamental ambiguity.
- 6 Fecundity of body and soul, we may note, furnishes a biblical as well as a Hellenic measure of being and truth.
- 7 De Silentio also tries to hide his tracks—but only manages thereby to reveal them—when he insists that, while Socrates can be understood by the poetic imagination, "no poet can find his way to Abraham" (SKS 4, 205 / FT, 118).
- 8 On Socrates' enchanting music, see *Symposium* 215c–d with 216a–b (where Alcibiades compares him to a Siren); on the turnabout of lover and beloved in Alcibiades' relationship with Socrates, see 216c.
- 9 Cf. SKS 18, 225, JJ:266 / KJN 2, 206: "the highest can be reached only as a limit."
- 10 I thank the anonymous referee for offering helpful comments on a draft of this article.

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