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## **THE MELANCHOLIC IRONY OF KIERKEGAARD**

*Irony is a healthiness  
insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; it is a sickness insofar as it cannot  
bear the absolute except in the form of nothing, but this sickness is an endemic disease that  
only a few individuals catch and from which fewer recover.*

The Socratic truth is in no way inferior to the Christian one according to Kierkegaard, since the very *existence of Socrates is irony*, as an *Aufhebung* of the two Socrates built by Platon and Xenofon: *Each of these two interpretations has, of course, sought to give a complete characterization of Socrates—Xenophon by pulling him down into the lower regions of the useful, Plato by elevating him into the supramundane regions of the idea. But the point, one that lies between, invisible and so very difficult to grasp securely, is irony. [...] Irony oscillates between the ideal I and the empirical I; the one would make Socrates a philosopher, the other a Sophist; but what makes him more than a Sophist is that his empirical I has universal*

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validity.<sup>1</sup> Putting aside the (r)evolution in Kierkegaard's view from the Hegelian perspective of the master's thesis to the later dimensions of irony, which becomes the very mechanism of his own *incognito* writing, we can affirm that the fundamental difference between the two truths is the fact that the former can't be given as such, is not circulated by means of a donation. Therefore, irony always pertains to a melancholic approach of existence because it denies all functional (effective) outwardness (exteriority) of the relation with the Other, whilst it also displaces the symptom of the melancholic void through a self-referential rhetoric that is structured around the sense of silence, more precisely, on silence as a *half sense* – (*half-saying, mi-dire* in Lacanian Psychoanalysis, according to which we can never consciously say the truth but only by half saying say it). That's why the stake of irony ultimately reaches an original opening, what Freud used to call *Bejahung*, even more than the *parapraxis* (a slip in the speech or discourse which bears the mark of the Unconscious inherent to the articulated language and to the discontinuity of *dis-course* as such). But irony is everywhere throughout Kierkegaard's oeuvre, without being conceptualized, but simply at work within the text itself – we could even name it a white demonic, in relative contrast to the gloomy seriousness of the paternal melancholy, but no less radical than it; a certain obscure note from the *Journal*, suggestively entitled *About myself*, can be interpreted as such a distinction between demonic and irony with respect to silence: *Silence hid in silence is suspicious, arouses mistrust, it is just as though one were to betray something; at least betrayed that one was keeping silence. But silence concealed by a decided talent for conversation – as true as ever I live – that is silence.*<sup>2</sup> We can observe the aforementioned insidious irony within the text in Kierkegaard's comparison with the truth of life, that suggests the ambiguity between an authentic vitality (as opposed to the romantic one) and the heaviness of life (heavy-mindedness – *Tungsind*, the key term for melancholy) hidden in the lightness of the heuristic talent – a

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<sup>1</sup> *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates (CI)*, XIII, 213, pp. 127-128.

<sup>2</sup> *Journals*, p. 245.

tension that will become acute in Kierkegaard's final years, when all his masks will have fallen.

Coming back to Socrates, we must mention first of all that his silence concentrates a melancholic resistance to language through, paraphrasing Sylviane Agacinski, the battle whose means and end is silence, at work like a phenomenological *epoché* with the fundamental commitment not to betray the truth: *The ironist talks at least this one did not write but he is not for all that a voice; he carries on a battle in which silence is both the means and the end of the combat. Even when he talks, the ironist does not say anything; he effaces himself in the questioning and allows the answers to become manifest in their apparent positivity. He is pure solicitation, provocation, although he himself remains hidden. And when at last all the answers have canceled themselves out, the ironist imposes silence on his distraught and befuddled interlocutors.*<sup>3</sup> Hence the double negativity, existential and conceptual, of Socrates, and also the fundamental indication of maieutics, which is not one of constraint, but of offering the occasion to experience the truth. According to Jeanne Hersch, Kierkegaard opposes the God (Christ), the condition of the truth, to Socrates, who stands for its occasion. The master is in this view only the occasion and that's precisely why he must not give himself over. The magnanimity and nobility that Kierkegaard bestows upon Socrates consists in his self effacement, in his disappearance in front of the eternal truth, whose discovery he had occasioned for the student.<sup>4</sup> Irony has nevertheless a demonic side, acknowledged as such by Kierkegaard, consequently, the peril of mortification is always present and, on the other hand, Socrates immerses the truth into the tragic, without being himself neither a tragic hero, nor a knight of faith, because once the receptive disposition for the truth has been formed, he simply disappears, cancelling any dialectics that could lead to a certain positivity by undermining both the negation itself and him as existence. (That's why, as we've mentioned in the beginning,

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<sup>3</sup> Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté. Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 42. Consequently, the *daimon* must remain abstract, for it doesn't allow any vocalization.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jeanne Hersch, *L'Instant* in *Kierkegaard vivant, Colloque organisé par l'UNESCO à Paris du 21 au 23 avril 1964*, p. 96.

Kierkegaard states that his *existence is irony*.) This anti-dialectics resembles what Lacanian Psychoanalysis understands by situating oneself in the lack of the Other's desire, not an imaginary blank, but a real one, insofar as for Lacan the real means the impossible *par excellence*. In Kierkegaard's Socratic dimension, we can develop these psychoanalytical insights even further, as long as we know that the melancholic identifies itself with this lack, which for him becomes indeed a real lack of lack (*manque du manque*) because the first lack has not been fully symbolized at the time of his castration, his entering into language. Moreover, just like the *objet a cause du désir*, the concept of Socrates is constituted as lost in the aftermath of his self-annihilation – given the fact that, as Kierkegaard puts it, he is *already dead*. That's why the melancholic identification with *the nothing* that overcomes all subjective identity can be traced throughout the Socratic irony, in contrast with the philosophical modern identity, an obsessional and always assertive one. It's the nature of remedy that Socrates can bring about in an age of the light-mindedness, that foreshadows the heavy-mindedness of melancholy, that of modernity which includes romanticism and Hegel, metaphysics and official Protestantism. That's why Socrates can only be an occasion for the truth, as it implies a double movement away from it: the first negation and then an anamnesis of the negation, because the master has to remind the disciple that he is the un-truth (which the disciple up discovering himself). As a place and origin of the tragic through the comic, irony, *constitutive in Socrates' life*, points to a melancholic negativity that institutes at the limit of language the heaviness of its disappearance – Kierkegaard's reference to the perspective(s) of Aristofan is eloquent in this respect: *This earnestness bears down too heavily, just as it also restricts the comic infinity, which as such recognizes no limits. Irony, on the other hand, is simultaneously a new position and as such is absolutely polemical toward early Greek culture. It is a position that continually cancels itself; it is a nothing that devours everything, and a something one can never grab hold of, something that is and is [XIII 217] not at the same time, but something that at rock bottom is comic. Therefore, just as irony surmounts everything by seeing its misrelation*

to the idea, so it capitulates to itself, because it continually goes over and beyond itself and yet remains in the idea.<sup>5</sup>

The affirmation of negation as an inexhaustible and abysmal return (foreshadowing the ineffable theme of the authentic repetition), without mortifying the idea in the Faustian demonical manner of a totalitarian representation, indicates an original version of the melancholic self-negation. The comic intertwined with the isolation and with the self absorption indicates an irresistible plunge into nothingness which, like the Heideggerian *Verfallen*, pertains to a dialectics of authenticity, but not in favor of the indetermination of Being, *for the absolute for him is nothing*, for irony *continually goes over and behind itself*. The exception is thus double: toward the maniac triumph of the sophists and towards the obsessional desire of Socrates' disciples, and, therefore, a non-philosophical articulation of the ironist as *a prophecy about or an abbreviation of a complete personality*. We think that this abbreviation can only manifest itself with and within the denial of the denial of language (the abovementioned double negation without Hegelian sublation). We can retrace the Lacanian *half saying* in this abbreviation for which Socrates stands because his status perpetually indicates the rest of the a mythical *jouissance* through a melancholic existence, even more so as the personality is annihilated at the end of the dialectics, the idea of Socrates collapses into the demonical abyss. The melancholic twofoldness that sustains the irreducible negativity of existence in its wholeness and at the same time the uniqueness of the self as a substantial rest unabridged by this negativity (the melancholic is less than nothing, and, like the modern Antigone, he has a unique pain, a thorn in the flesh) is thus somewhat reinvented by the ironist through his constant reference to the abstract intelligent interplay of contradictions and of self overtaking into nothingness from the narcissistic perspective towards both the world and language – otherwise that's the melancholic disposition claimed by Kierkegaard until the very end: the melancholic condition of being alone within the world.

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<sup>5</sup> *CI*, XIII, 217, p. 131.

We can now conclude our short exposé by a final articulation. In regards to offering an alternative identity to the idealistic and Hegelian one, Kierkegaard seems to oscillate between the conceptualization of irony as a presentation (an *acting-out* in psychoanalytical terms) and a representation of the fundamental negativity that fuels it<sup>6</sup>. The two positions are approximately covered on the one hand by the distinction between the Socratic irony and the modern one and on the other by the inner division of the irony *sensu eminentiori* – executive and contemplative, Here we can see the dimension of infinite absolute negativity where Kierkegaard meets Hegel and this is the closest his view gets to Hegel's. S. Agacinski arguably suggests that *Kierkegaard's early Hegelianism becomes a whole new dialectics within the first one, given the fact that his Socrates becomes more negative than Hegel's: If Hegel can be said to have perfectly understood Socrates' negativity (Kierkegaard borrows most of his analyses from him), he also wanted to find a "positive aspect" in Socrates that would have made him assimilable to the history of philosophy. This leads Hegel to "divide" Socrates and finally to relegate irony, or the "questioning attitude," to a secondary status by distinguishing it from its goal: the positing by subjectivity of the Idea as such. But this goal itself is not reached by Socrates. Since the Idea is "still" entirely abstract, it has no content whatsoever.*<sup>7</sup> The interplay that emerges between an inscription of the ironist in the brink of reflexivity and the lack of the symbolic that seems to always resist demonically directly to the religious negativity of Abraham – the one that defines the absolute relation to the absolute – bears thus the suspense of irony, an

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<sup>6</sup> According to Abraham Kahn, who differentiates between *Tungsindet* and *Melancholi*, granting irony only to the later, there is a positive and total dimension of irony: "His development of the concept is such as the expression « irony as a mastered moment » is crucial for his interpretation of an authentic human existence. He singles out for his purpose a particular species of irony and calls it irony in its essential greatness, as its zenith. When mastered, this particular form of irony, has, in brief, a chastening effect on the personal life. In a profound sense, Kierkegaardian irony is a profound way of being in the world, a condition for acquiring wholeness of personality or human plenitude.", "Melancholy, Irony, and Kierkegaard" p. 68, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 17, No. 1/2 (1985), pp. 67-85.

<sup>7</sup> S. Agacinski, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

incommunicable proof of the exception of the melancholic.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we can understand that irony's ultimate key, while rewritten throughout all of Kierkegaard's literary registers, is *Boredom, [...] the only continuity the ironist has. Boredom, this eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut.* As it's the duty of the existential thinker to keep the wound of negativity open, it's also a fatal encounter with the nudity of existence that gapes the wound beforehand. Therefore, irony bears witness to the incommunicable truth of existence, the real *lack of lack* that the melancholic denounces and simultaneously affirms, in his suspension between the object cause of *desire* and an unfathomable and *eminent* object cause of *nothing*, nothing of the *Other (Autre)* of language.

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<sup>8</sup> An exception portrayed as melancholic in an eloquent paragraph of the *Journal: Oh, the sadness of having understood something true and then of only seeing oneself misunderstood. Oh, sadness for what is irony in the mystery of the heart but sadness. Sadness means to be alone in having understood something true and as soon as one is in company with others, with those who misunderstand, that sadness becomes irony.* *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Socratic truth is in no way inferior to the Christian one in Kierkegaard's view. The fundamental difference between the two is that whereas the later develops by means of a donation and of a specific dialectic as such, the former is hidden within the negative and anti-dialectical discourse of irony. We can therefore maintain that irony always pertains to the melancholic dimension of existence. My work aims to consider irony as a melancholic negativity, insofar as it is closely related to the demonic silence and void and as it rejects the wholeness of philosophical language. Sickness and health, symptom and remedy, the Kierkegaardian irony is melancholic because it perpetually suffers from its own re-opened wound, which allows us to interpret it from a psychoanalytical standpoint. Thus, the affinity between Kierkegaard and psychoanalysis sustains a Lacanian approach to the melancholic irony, in order to clarify its function in pinpointing the "real" truth of existence through a resistance to language.

**KEYWORDS:** irony, melancholy, Psychoanalysis, negativity, language

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** ironia, melancholia, psychoanaliza, język