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Aesthetic Pedagogy: Kierkegaard and Adorno on the Communication of Possibility

Clifford Gentry Lee

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AESTHETIC PEDAGOGY:
KIERKEGAARD AND ADORNO ON THE COMMUNICATION OF POSSIBILITY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School
Of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Clifford Gentry Lee, IV

April 2008

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By
Clifford Gentry Lee, IV

Approved April 2, 2008

Dr. Ron Polansky, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
(Dissertation Director)

Dr. James Swindal, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy, Chair
(Committee Member)

Dr. Tom Rockmore, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

Albert C. Labriola, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty Graduate School
Of Liberal Arts

ABSTRACT

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By

Clifford Gentry Lee, IV

April 2008

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. Ron Polansky, Ph.D.

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This dissertation focuses on Adorno's appropriative reading of Kierkegaard. Adorno interprets Kierkegaard's notion of the aesthetic as an active philosophical principal. He finds this principle to be at work throughout Kierkegaard's authorship as the means of the justification of the particular and concrete in defiance of their would be enslavement to the general and abstract. The aesthetic principle is that which requires Kierkegaard's readers to become active participants in the formation of the experienced meaning of his texts. Adorno's approach facilitates a reading of Kierkegaard that focuses on his pedagogical use of the communicative power of imagery. At the same time, the attention being drawn to the Kierkegaardian element of Adorno's philosophy provides a means for comprehending the experiential dimension of Adorno's writings. Both thinkers write with the goal of communicating awareness of the possibility of human freedom.

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Introduction

i. Overview of the Project

When the word “aesthetic” is used within the context of Søren Kierkegaard’s writings, more times than not, it connotes one of two possibilities: either a way of living or a specific style of writing. The latter refers to the inimitable confluence of the poetic and the philosophical that characterizes much of Kierkegaard’s work. The former, however, refers to a specific theme developed within this authorship – namely, a way of life, contrasted with the ethical and the religious alternatives, characterized by an ironic effort to determine meaning by means of the indeterminate. Understood as three subjective determinative states of meaning from which the individual must choose or by which the individual is chosen, these three stages have become the hallmark of Kierkegaard’s foundational significance for the existential thought of the 20th century. Yet, the developmental movement implied by the hierarchical nature of this idea – from the lowest sphere of the aesthetic through the ethical and on to the heights of the religious – commonly results in a reduction of the meaning of the aesthetic to the religious truths of which it could only be a debasement or to which it unknowingly aspires.¹ The

¹ This is not to say that the developmental approach to understanding the spheres is, in and of itself, a mistake, but only that the exclusive use of such an approach prevents recognition of the full significance of the aesthetic. Kierkegaard’s prioritization of the religious over the philosophical/aesthetic is a direct

following study will not make such an assumption. It will aim to excavate a layer of theoretical richness buried deep within Kierkegaard's treatment of the aesthetic, one that is only uncovered when liberated from its subservient role and, as a consequence, allowed to show itself at work as a fundamental and irreducible element of Kierkegaard's thought.

Though invariably present, the aesthetic is rarely the recipient of direct definition. A notable occurrence of such directness is found within the second half of Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. Through the voice of Judge William, we hear the following:

the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is; the ethical is that by which he becomes what he becomes. The person who lives in and by and from and for the esthetic that is in him, that person lives esthetically.²

Focusing attention on what is being said about the aesthetic, we notice that not only is it equated with a state within which one may live, but it is also likened to an ideal one could live by, for, and from; it is more a principle of evaluation, in this case, than a state of being. In his discussion of this passage's implications for understanding Kierkegaard's authorship, Louis Mackey claims that here the primary constituent of this ideal is provided as that immediacy which the aesthete, in some way, attempts to be. Which is to say, as a notion essentially linked with the idea of the immediate, the aesthetic has a central role to play in the conceptual drama that is Kierkegaard's authorship considered

inversion of the Hegelian prioritization of philosophy over religion, the truths of which, conversely, are equated with the aesthetic as symbolic/pictorial expressions of the potential unity of consciousness with its object that find their complete expression in the conceptual knowing of philosophy. Cf. sections VII and VIII of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Part 2, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 172.

as a whole. Expressing its centrality, Mackey writes: “immediacy – never possessed but always forfeit, vainly sought and paradoxically bestowed – is the *cantus firmus* about which the polyphonic Kierkegaardian literature shapes its varied and often dissonant counterpoint.”³ Expanding on this fitting metaphor, the persisting melody of immediacy can be said to be itself composed of notes played through the various conceptual issues immediacy poses to thought. Questions concerning whether or not immediate and concrete experience can be known or experienced as such, how and to what extent reflection is capable of accuracy in its representations, and to what degree is the role language serves in the effective communication of experience itself capable of being communicated, are examples of the individual notes constructive of the melody of immediacy as it plays itself out throughout Kierkegaard’s writings. Therefore, if we wish to comprehend the significance of the aesthetic in his work, thorough attention must be given to the way its constitutive notes, these and other questions of a seeming theoretical nature, all speak to the same issue – the knowing and communicating of immediacy.

A consideration of the possibility of the conceptualization and/or communication of immediacy is crucial to Kierkegaard’s strategic attempt to think Hegelian philosophy differently. For Hegel, immediacy is never immediate. All experience assumes a pre-existing I, as the subject of experience, and a pre-existing thing, as the object experienced, both of which he contends are dependent upon conceptual processes preceding the experience itself. Thus, all experience, even that of experience’s immediacy, is the product of mediation.⁴ Kierkegaard’s philosophical project seeks to

³ Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 3-4.

⁴ “Among the countless differences cropping up here we find in every case that the crucial one is that, in sense-certainty, pure being at once splits up into what we have called the two ‘Thises’, one ‘This’ as ‘I’,

disrupt the hegemonic force expressed by this claim; that is, it aims to restore validity to the immediacy that accompanies concrete experience, to conceive then, *contra* Hegel, what would appear to be inconceivable. This critique is not external but internal to the processes of dialectical thought. Kierkegaard always thinks a radical singularity taken up from a position inside the systematic movement of dialectical thought toward greater generality. As a result, the systematic efficacy of this movement is interrupted from within. What is abandoned, not successfully preserved by the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, evidences itself by means of these disruptions in continuity, shows itself, that is, by displaying the irreducibility of the particular to the concept. In order to understand effectively how Kierkegaard's writings perform this validation of immediacy, it is necessary to undertake a critical examination of his views on the distinctions between language and thought, thought and expression, and, as Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, frames it, the difference between thought, as reflection, and being, as experience.⁵

If language serves as the central medium through which experience is mediated into thought, and, as Hegel contends, if the expressive content of language is always an

and the other 'This' as object. When *we* reflect on this difference, we find that neither one nor the other is only *immediately* present in sense-certainty, but each is at the same time *mediated*: I have this certainty, but each is at the same time *mediated*: I have this certainty *through* something else, viz. The thing: and it, similarly, is in sense-certainty *through* something else, viz. through the 'I.'" Hegel, 61.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). How this distinction results from Kierkegaard's notion of existence, and how this notion is the mark of an irreducible particularity expressed by human existence are themes present throughout this text. To provide a concise example: "God does not think, he creates; God does not exist [*existere*], he is eternal. A human being thinks and exists, and existence [*Existents*] separates thinking and being, holds them apart from each other in succession." Kierkegaard, 332.

utterance of “the universal,” even if what is meant is particular,⁶ then the linguistic nature of Kierkegaard’s dilemma is evident. As a result, the content of any experience is incommunicable as particular and is only real to the extent that it is expressed through the linguistic signification of a universal. Assuming one has an immediate experiential sense of being a unique self, is it possible for it to survive the translation into universals seemingly necessary for it to be communicated at all? If not, is this sense of self, then, considered as an originator of action and speech, as a result, at best a necessary deception, an illusory producer of language when it is, in fact, its product? Working against a position that would answer this last question affirmatively, Kierkegaard’s thought sets the task for itself of attesting to a positive truth-value of a singular and concrete experience of the self. The drama of the success or failure of this undertaking happens within his development and deployment of the aesthetic principle, which, as we have seen, is intertwined with an effort to validate a form of particularity, despite its resistance to conceptualization. Supporting this approach to Kierkegaard’s aesthetic is the exclusive reading it receives from Theodor Adorno in his early work titled *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.⁷ It is to this work, then, that our attention will now turn.

⁶ “...in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*.” Hegel, 60. For example, if I wish to refer to a specific object, say this pencil lying on my desk, when speaking to you, it is only the ‘this’ that designates the particularity of the pencil on my desk; the word ‘pencil’ itself expresses a universal, in this case, the ‘idea’ of the pencil in its conceptual definition of a wooden writing utensil using – the point being that when I use the word pencil to refer to this specific object, I do not communicate the specific object in its particularity and thus do not communicate what I intend to, but, I do communicate its ‘truth’ in its ideality.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Published in 1933 this book, Adorno’s first published full-length work, was a significantly revised version of his *Habilitationsschrift*, which had been submitted

Among the early twentieth-century receptions of Kierkegaard's work in Germany, the place occupied by Adorno's book is unique.⁸ Adorno's is the only appropriation of Kierkegaard that takes the form of critique. A critique, however, that cannot be said to be a dismissal.⁹ Adorno reads Kierkegaard as a philosopher who makes a valiant attempt to escape the entrapments of Hegelian idealism only to redistribute the idealistic structure he attempts to overthrow. The essence of his critical stance is captured by his claim that Kierkegaard turns Hegel inside out: "world history is for Hegel what the individual is for Kierkegaard."¹⁰ At the same time, Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard proves to be a productive enterprise. It allows for the exposure of an ubiquitous force of disruption in Kierkegaard's work. This force becomes constructed into a principle of the aesthetic that proves to be critically at work in preventing the subsumption of particularity under generality. The activity of the aesthetic for Adorno, opens up a space of possibility within which the activity of critical thought, *contra* all totalizing processes, might be

and successfully approved by his director, Paul Tillich in 1930. Incidentally, this writing was Adorno's second submission of a *Habilitationsschrift*, which is, more or less, the equivalent of a second dissertation required by German universities for the attainment of a professorship. His first attempt, a study titled *The Concept of the Unconscious in Freud and Kant*, had been rejected by his former director, Hans Cornelius, in 1927. For a discussion of these events and those surrounding the publication of Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, cf. the translator's introduction to the book pages x-xiii.

⁸ For an informative discussion of Kierkegaard's early 20th century receptions, cf. "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48-75.

⁹ Although, excepting Adorno's book, Kierkegaard's reception in Germany was arguably uncritical, the same cannot be said about Kierkegaard's reception in his home country. In the early part of the 20th century in Denmark he was either dismissed or made subject to scathing criticisms. Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 48-50.

¹⁰ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 74. Put differently and with more detail, "this description [i.e., Kierkegaard's description of existence] conceals an antinomy in his thought that becomes evident in the subject/object relation ... this is an antinomy in the conception of the relation to ontological 'meaning,' Kierkegaard conceives of such meaning, contradictorily, as radically developed upon the 'I,' as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence – free, active subjectivity is for Kierkegaard the bearer of all reality." Adorno, 27.

achieved and sustained. As “the region of dialectical semblance,” Kierkegaard’s aesthetic holds out the possibility of the attainment of a truly historical form of truth, “through the collapse of existence, whereas the ‘ethical’ and ‘religious’ spheres, on the contrary, remain those of subjective, sacrificial conjuration, forfeiting hope with the abnegation of semblance.”¹¹ While an explication of the full import of this interpretation will be worked out in the chapters of the study to follow, for now it should suffice to note, that although Adorno’s reading is decisively critical, even destructive of several of the ideas most commonly attributed to Kierkegaard, it is, in no way, dismissive of his importance. Adorno’s interpretation is certainly unusual; moreover, many might find the pairing of these two thinkers to be itself unusual: Adorno, the cryptic neo-Marxian critic of mass culture; Kierkegaard, the frail proponent of an absurd faith and foundational figure of 20th century existentialism, whose notion of authenticity Adorno expended great effort to repudiate.¹² Thus, before continuing to outline the significance of Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard for this present inquiry, it might be helpful to establish the rarely noted affinity between the thought of these two philosophers.

Even though one can find Kierkegaard’s name interspersed throughout Adorno’s extensive body of writing, after the publication of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the*

¹¹ Adorno, 131.

¹² Adorno’s critique of existentialism primarily took as its target the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. It finds its fullest expression in his *Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederik Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). In a nutshell, he argues that Heidegger’s thought represents an idealization of subjectivity over which the jargonistic principle of authenticity acts as a mask, so to speak, which covers over its participation in the absolutizing of authority. Heidegger, as is well known, tried to distance his own thinking from participating in the existential school of thought. For a relatively concise statement of how he views his thinking to be different from existentialism, which he sees as a new form of humanistic metaphysics, cf. his “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. Frank Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977), 213-266.

Aesthetic, and with the exception of two short essays,¹³ Adorno never again applies his thinking directly to the writings of Kierkegaard. This is not to say, however, that Adorno's own thinking drops any and all thought of Kierkegaard. The ostensible lack of attention given to Kierkegaard post the publication of his own *Kierkegaard* may belie his extensive use of Kierkegaardian insights and strategies throughout his authorship. In any case, there are parallels between the two thinkers that suggest that Adorno's early full-length study of Kierkegaard was not his final farewell to the Danish thinker. Let us turn our attention briefly then to the outline of a couple of these substantial parallels. Both Kierkegaard and Adorno are rightly described as anti-systematic thinkers whose common source of reference resides within the dialectical thought of Hegel - both think within and against the dialectic. While Kierkegaard's thought could be described as a prioritizing of the spiritual side of the poles of dialectical thinking, that is, a focus on the subject side of the subject-object relation, and conversely, Adorno's thinking, in its insistent focus on the object, could be described as emphasizing the material side of the subject-object pole, both endeavor to enact a way of thinking that recovers the experience and/or knowledge of particularity from its submersion within the systematic framework of Hegel's philosophy. For Adorno, the particularity of the object is misrepresented by the conceptual in what he terms "identity thinking," and to which he opposes his own attempt to think the "non-identical."¹⁴ Kierkegaard, on the other hand, exposes the misrepresentation of the particular self by the conceptual operations of "the system," to

¹³ Theodor Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," in *Søren Kierkegaard: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 19-34; "Kierkegaard Noch Einmal," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

¹⁴ "Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself - of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept." Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 147.

which he opposes thought of the paradoxical notion of “existence.”¹⁵ That the commonality between these approaches might run deeper than their differences begins to be seen by considering the following passage, which, one is almost inclined to say could have been written by either of the two thinkers:

If, then, an *existing person* asks about the relation between thinking and being, between thinking and existing [*existere*], and philosophy explains that this relation is one of identity, it does not answer the question, because it does not answer the questioner. Philosophy explains: Thinking and being are one ... but thinking and being are one in relation to that whose existence is essentially a matter of indifference because it is so abstract....¹⁶

With the identification of the “non-identical” Adorno confirms that any identification between thought/subject and object/being claimed in Hegel’s idealism is purely hypothetical and speculative. It is viewed as the product of a thinking that, unjustifiably and forcefully, imposes a unification of reason with the world onto experience. This imposition is without justification in that the construction of the conceptual, as the *modus operandi* of the act of identification, is shown to represent inadequately the diversity and particularity of experience.¹⁷ Moreover, as Kierkegaard notes in the passage above, whatever the results achieved by means of this unification of thought and being, it remains a union in and for thought only; consequently, its relevance is confined to an abstract realm exclusive of the concretion of human existence.

¹⁵ “A system of existence [*Tilværelsens System*] cannot be given ... abstractly viewed, system and existence cannot be thought conjointly, because in order to think existence, systematic thought must think it as annulled and consequently not as existing.” Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 118.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 330-331.

¹⁷ This explanation of identity thinking is indebted to Andrew Fagan’s clear exposition: “Theodor Adorno,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, <http://www.iep.utm.edu>.

A brief comparison of the following two quotes should prove helpful in further teasing out how similar Adorno is to Kierkegaard here:

Nonidentity is the secret *telos* of identification. It is the part that can be salvaged; the mistake in traditional thinking is that identity is taken for the goal. The force that shatters the appearance of identity is the force of thinking ... Dialectically, cognition of nonidentity [i.e., the type of thought his version of dialectical thinking allows] lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies ... to a greater extent, and in other ways, than identitarian thinking. This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself.¹⁸

What is abstract thinking? It is thinking where there is no thinker. It ignores everything but thought, and in its own medium only thought is. Existence is not thoughtless, but in existence thought is in an alien medium. What does it mean, then, in the language of abstract thinking to ask about actuality in the sense of existence when abstraction expressly ignores it? – What is concrete thinking? It is thinking where there are a thinker and a specific something (in the sense of particularity) that is being thought... .¹⁹

The point of divergence between these two statements is within the specific diagnoses for which their thought is the curative: the vanishing of the I taking place within abstract thought, for Kierkegaard; for Adorno, the replacement of the experienced object with an abstract representation that it is not. Kierkegaard seeks to recuperate the subject, in all of its particularity, and Adorno seeks to do the same for the object, again in all of its particularity. The success, however, of either project, is not achieved by means of exclusion – while one side of the subject-object dialectic may receive a prioritization, it is not by means of the elimination of the other. Kierkegaard states that in his project of thinking the concrete there is a specific thinker and a specific something thought, a point

¹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 332.

which, no doubt, will be invoked in defense of Kierkegaard's position against the charge of subjective idealism. According to Adorno, concrete thinking, which assumes the specificity of the thinker, disrupts abstract processes of identification and re-connects concretely with the object – with, as he phrases it, “what something is.”²⁰ What, then, is this concrete something that something is?

The concrete as explained by Samuel Weber:

concreteness – a key word in the writings of Adorno – consists essentially in the *growing together* of thought through which knowledge is constituted. Such a concretion involves the move beyond the conception of knowledge as passive *medium* to a conception of knowledge as an active *process of self-constituting*.²¹

Distinguishing itself from the passive reflection of the pre-constituted truths of identity thinking, concrete thinking is contingent upon the constitutive activity of thought itself. In the face of the impasse posed by the hold the mediating function of language possesses over any expression of concretion, Adorno asserts that the concrete, if it is to be thought at all, “must be constructed, configured, construed – through a process that necessarily involves *reading* as much as *interpretation*.”²² Concrete thinking constructs thought.

²⁰ While there is substantial concordance between these two thinkers in their shared attempt to think concretely against a totalizing and abstract form of rationality and in their concern with the impediment of this task posed by the schism existing between reflection/language and immediacy/experience, they hold contrary views as to the origination of this condition. Kierkegaard makes use of a trans-historical myth of the fall away from the wholeness provided by the grace of God and into a state of knowing that can only be known as sin. This attempt to posit a subject conditioned by events transcending the historical is precisely where Adorno will direct much of his criticism. For Adorno, the false consciousness within the age of the triumph of a cold and abstract rationality is itself, a product, of an immanent development of historical/social/economic events. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. R. Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) for a dense book length discussion of the trans-historical nature of sin and its historical effects. Adorno's critique likewise stretches throughout his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Chapter four of this study will consist of a detailed examination of the *Concept of Anxiety* conducted in an effort to offer a substantial response to Adorno's critique.

²¹ Samuel Weber, “‘As Though the End of the World has Come and Gone...’ Critical Theory and the Task of Reading or: *Allemal ist nicht immergleich*,” in *New German Critique* 81 (2000): 86.

²² Weber, 86.

Adorno's subject is, as a consequence, neither absent nor passive – rather, it is thoroughly active. This task assigned to this subject requires it be neither a container in need of being filled nor the producer of a world through the thinking of itself. A conception of the subject having existence prior to the immediacy of the meeting between it and its contents substitutes an object for the subject, and, as a result, effectively replaces concretion with abstraction. Yet, the concrete has only received a negative definition. For how is it to be defined positively without having recourse to the abstract, if in no other way, through the words with which the concrete becomes interpreted. This is a quandary with which both Adorno and Kierkegaard contend. Perhaps, Adorno's "interpretation" finds its parallel in Kierkegaard's notion of "appropriation," found in his claim that truth is "an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness."²³ Yet, exploring this potential would require many more pages of analysis and cause us to stray a bit far from the primary purpose of this essay. Let us leave it then for the future work of this project.

The parallels noted above, the probing of which, we should recall, commenced from a need to establish the viability of pairing the thought of Kierkegaard with that of Adorno, have hopefully satisfied their purpose. Our attention can now return to the particular viewpoint adopted by Adorno in his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Adorno's reading is particularly helpful in supporting an approach to Kierkegaard that seeks to unravel the way his thought is concentrated around the relationship between immediacy and language. This is owing to the unique approach Adorno adopts in his treatment of the existence spheres – the aesthetic, the ethical and the

²³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 203.

religious – one that Kevin Newmark captures well by noting that Adorno’s reading offers “a semiology rather than a phenomenology of subjective truth.”²⁴ Demarcated here is a shift from description to interpretation. While an accurate portrait of the phenomenon of the individual free to make a choice between three spheres of meaning is emphasized in the descriptive, the interpretative approach emphasizes the problematic, yet central, issue of the meaning and possibility of communication within Kierkegaard’s writings. Communication is interpretative to the extent that it recognizes the incommunicability of its own occurrence; that is, how the translating of concrete experience into the abstract universals of language cannot itself directly communicate that which performs the translation – does not disclose the existence, in Kierkegaard’s sense of the word, of the individual self. As a consequence, any attempt at doing so inexorably entails the interpretation implied by the “appropriation” present in Kierkegaard’s definition of truth. Within this framework, the function of the spheres is not in providing direct “access to subjective determinations;” instead, they are understood to constitute “three different, but mutually dependent, modes of interpretation,” the truth of which, “the self must discover and interpret, not embody.”²⁵

Adorno’s interpretive lens serves to magnify Kierkegaard’s reflections on language and its limits.²⁶ A critical appropriation of this lens should, therefore, prove to

²⁴ Kevin Newmark, “Secret Agents: After Kierkegaard’s Subject” in *Modern Language Notes* 112.5 (1997): 721.

²⁵ Newmark, 721.

²⁶ Adorno’s approach attests to the presence of an implicit, though not necessarily hidden, theory of the construction of linguistic meaning within the indirect communication characteristic of Kierkegaard’s work; hence, its being described as semiology. “For Kierkegaard, the fundamental problem is that of ‘communication,’ the possibility of revealing truth adequately in the medium of language. It is because of the structural impossibility of communicating truth directly that Kierkegaard, according to Blanchot, is led to thematize in such a sustained manner the ‘secret’ that would eventually cause him to suffer doubly from

be a productive tool in analyzing the validation granted to the concrete and immediate by Kierkegaard's deployment of the aesthetic. Yet, Adorno's interpretation is still a critique – one whose substance must be directly evaluated. Kierkegaard is charged with extending the idealism he sets out to undermine: the dialectical progression of reason within history of Hegelian idealism becomes Kierkegaard's interior dialectic of the developmental narrative of the existing self. Kierkegaard's interiority, in its claim of absolutism, is argued to be an empty abstraction, not capable of predication, and thus severed from the concreteness it was created to attain.²⁷ One of the major stepping-stones, on the path leading to this critical conclusion, is Kierkegaard's apparent equivocation on the status of the relationship between language and history. Adorno explains that within Kierkegaard's thought: language is both "the form of the communication of pure subjectivity," and, at one and the same time, always presents itself in the form of the "historically objective."²⁸ Recall that one of Kierkegaard's

his own need and inability 'to speak,' and also to theorize in a more general way on the necessity and effects of the Christian writer's remaining 'incognito' and 'pseudonymous.'" Here, in this passage taken from the introduction to his translation of a work by Sylviane Agacinski, Newmark credits Blanchot rather than Adorno as the originator of the idea of there being a theory of language embedded in Kierkegaard's works and central to an understanding of his entire enterprise. The essay referred to here is titled "Kierkegaard's Journals;" it was first published in 1943 as a chapter of Blanchot's *Faux Paux*, ten years after the publication of Adorno's book. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that Blanchot's reading of Kierkegaard was influenced by Adorno's. This is certainly implied by Newmark by his attributing more or less the same insight to Blanchot that he would later attribute to Adorno, but one wonders why he did not directly address this issue. Newmark, "Taking Kierkegaard Apart," introduction to *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. K. Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), 8. Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, trans. C. Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 17-22.

²⁷ Adorno also will claim that Kierkegaard's efforts to retreat into an interior ultimately fail their purpose, as he, unwittingly, brings the structure of the material world with him in the form of a consciousness of class privilege. Later I will argue that Kierkegaard was much more aware of the role social and economic conditioning plays in the production of false consciousness than Adorno acknowledges. Such an awareness is indirectly present throughout his work and occasionally direct; for example, "but a passionless age *has* no assets; everything becomes a transaction in *paper money*," such that "in the end money becomes the object of desire." Kierkegaard, *A Literary Review*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 66.

²⁸ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 35.

primary concerns is the inability of particularity to communicate itself as such. The concrete particular must take recourse to the abstract and universal to express itself; thus, its expression of itself is invariably of something other than that which it intends.

Adorno's assessment of Kierkegaard's equivocation only highlights the significance of this communicative tight spot: the purely subjective corresponding to the attempted articulation of particularity and the historically objective representing how such an attempt ends within the abstract. Kierkegaard's response to what might be called the entrapment of the subjective within the objective is, according to Adorno, to instigate a retreat into the subjective that hopes entirely to "anathematize" history – this retreat into interiority, so it is claimed, stands at the apex of idealism's development.²⁹ While this case may warrant an indictment, we will see that it does not secure a straightforward conviction. For there is evidence suggesting that Kierkegaard was indeed aware of his thought's participation within a residual idealism. This awareness attenuates the impact of Adorno's critique. Moreover, Kierkegaard will be shown to attest to the tautness with which idealism binds comprehension. It is this containment of thought from which he attempts to liberate himself repetitively only invariably to declare it impossible – for thought, that is, although, perhaps, not so impossible for faith.³⁰

²⁹ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 35.

³⁰ The failure of the pseudonymous author, *Johannes de Silentio*, to understand the faith of Abraham is probably the best known example of such an effort, so to speak, of thought attempting to think its own limits, to think itself out of its dependency on the abstract and the universal and into the extreme particularity of a relation between the individual and the absolute – only to show it to be incomprehensible. Chapter three of this dissertation will explore the possibility that within this failure is contained the paradoxical success of Kierkegaard's indirect communication of freedom, possibility and hope. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Despite his critical approach, Adorno's thought displays a Kierkegaardian influence running quite deep into the heart of his project – indeed, from the vantage point adopted by the foregoing analysis, that is, one which regards communication as Kierkegaard's central concern, his work can even be viewed as an extension of the project originated by Kierkegaard.³¹ Behind the writings of both thinkers is a shared desire to create a critical space for the individual against a world threatening its annihilation. This space of critical freedom must be sustained as a possibility against the closure threatened by rationality's culmination, once and for all, in actuality. Always antagonistic toward the anonymous crowd of mass society, their thought supports and addresses the critical responsibility of the individual. Note the Kierkegaardian spirit of the following passage from Adorno:

In the age of the individual's liquidation, the question of individuality must be raised anew. While the individual has ... fallen behind the state of technology and become historically obsolete, he becomes the custodian of truth, as the condemned against the victor. For the individual alone preserves, in however a distorted form, a trace of that which legitimizes all technification.³²

The preservative force of the individual mentioned here is attested to with equivalent urgency throughout Kierkegaard's writings: "The single individual is the category through which, in a religious sense, the age, history, the generation must go"³³ in defiance

³¹ According to Geoffrey Hale, Adorno is among the most astute readers of Kierkegaard, only equaled by Kafka and Rilke. He contends that all three authors, and all under the direct influence of Kierkegaard in their own individual way, enact a continuation of the project of communicating a fragmentary form of truth. His is also one of the few recent scholarly treatments of Kierkegaard that takes seriously the idea of there being a theory of linguistic meaning enacted through his writing. Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 34.

³² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: NLB Press, 1974), 129.

³³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 401.

of the tendency of the age “to make life easier by making it more thoughtless” in becoming “a little fraction of the crowd.”³⁴ Kierkegaard’s presence within Adorno is evidenced with even more assurance by the demonstrably analogous viewpoints they adopt regarding the issue of communicating this message of possibility. Such a message is inseparable from the medium of its conveyance, for both. In order to establish this convergence, the stylistic qualities of their respective writing must be examined. We will turn our attention briefly to such a description, then, before concluding this overview.

A serious treatment of either Kierkegaard’s or Adorno’s works necessitates that the activity of reading be interpretative in character. As a consequence of the *maieutic* strategy employed by both authors, to read them at all one is forced to play a contributory role within the unfolding of the drama of thought on the page. Reading becomes, in this way, an interrogation of the reader. The meaning of Kierkegaard’s texts must be constructed indirectly and individually by the responses the reader provides to this examination. The over-determination of concepts decisive for understanding his thought, the elaborate use of pseudonyms expressive of divergent and conflicting points of view, the seemingly perpetual twists of logic, all serve to thwart the possibility of an interpretation claiming to uncover a systematic unity to his work that could be applied to it by its every reader. As David Sherman notes about this peculiar way of writing: “Instead of conveying ‘objective’ truths, it respects the freedom of all parties to the communication by only providing the occasion for the recipients to come to their own subjective truths.”³⁵ This pedagogical dimension of Kierkegaard’s writings is well

³⁴ Kierkegaard, 397.

³⁵ David Sherman, “Adorno’s Kierkegaardian Debt,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27.1 (2001): 94.

known. The same, however, cannot be said about its presence in Adorno's work. Yet, Sherman continues, "for Adorno, too, the objective is to communicate in a manner that forces the recipients to contribute something to their assimilation of the communication (which is precisely what mass society tends to discourage), and it is this objective that motivates both the complex and fragmentary nature of his works."³⁶ Taking into consideration Adorno's fondness for the aphoristic, his disavowal of the structural function of paragraphs, his propensity not to offer conclusions, and his replacement of syntax with parataxis, the claim that his writing calls for an interpretative reader seems quite convincing. Both Kierkegaard and Adorno endeavor to produce a critically reflective subject as their reader. Perhaps, this movement from passive receptor to active contributor serves to counteract the passive, apathetic form of subjectivity produced by modern society. For now, we conclude only that there is an unexplored richness to be found here within the convergences of these two nonsystematic means of communicating thought. Accordingly, this study proposes carefully and critically to plumb the depths of this richness.

In concluding this section, then, let us recapitulate some of the primary points developed that will be the focus of this exploration. The aesthetic will be shown to be an essential element of Kierkegaard's thought. Present, as a consequence, throughout Kierkegaard's work, the aesthetic is demonstrated to be an active principle justifying the particular, the concrete, the immediate, in defiance of their would be enslavement to the general, the abstract, the reflective. Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard facilitates this reading in two ways: his innovative focus on the issues of language and

³⁶ Sherman, 94.

communication as central to Kierkegaard's project frees us from adhering blindly to the presuppositions of an exclusively existential approach; his approaching Kierkegaard as, first and foremost, a philosopher who espouses a principle of the aesthetic, allows us to see how, considered in this way, the aesthetic is indeed disruptively active throughout all of his work. In the process of coming to an understanding of this interpretation's significance, a number of parallels between the thought of Adorno and Kierkegaard come to light and are deemed sufficiently important to require thorough analysis. The critical dimension of Adorno's treatment aside, we will see that not only does our reading of Kierkegaard benefit from the reading he receives from him, but also our reading of Adorno profits from the discovery of Kierkegaard's influence on him. The culminating insight of the following study is thus reached: the projective goal of the writings of both Kierkegaard and Adorno is the communication of concreteness and possibility, a task which they, each in his own way, seeks to perform by means of the aesthetic. The success of this communication is likened to an aesthetic education – the hoped for end result of which is the generation of acute awareness within the individual of his/her responsibility for undertaking a critical examination of his/her self and world. In this way, the aesthetic seeks to animate the Socratic spirit of inquiry at the root of the philosophical enterprise by teaching that the examined life is the only one worth enduring.

ii. Overview of the Scholarship

The amount written about Kierkegaard's capacious output is itself voluminous.³⁷

This can seem a bit daunting for someone hoping to make a contribution to this vast body of work. What could be left undone in understanding this thinker? What issue not already exhausted so that a repetition of the known is the likely outcome? The inquiry pursued in the present study fortunately need reckon little with this risk of repetition; but, for this very reason, it must address the body of Kierkegaardian scholarship as a whole. For within this extensive body of scholarship the significance of Adorno's early work, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, has been, for the most part, either overlooked or dismissed.³⁸ Not one major study of Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard or, for that matter, of the Kierkegaardian aspects of Adorno's work, has been published in English.³⁹

³⁷ Charles Bellinger's bibliography of book length studies of Kierkegaard lists over 250 books published after 1960 in English alone. Available at: <http://libnt2.lib.tcu.edu/staff/bellinger/SK2ndary-bib.htm>.

³⁸ For example, Adorno's name is not mentioned at all in any of the following: Ronald L. Hall, *Word and Spirit: A Kierkegaardian Critique of the Modern Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); Josiah Thompson, *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967); Michael Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994); Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). This is not meant to be an exclusive list of those excluding Adorno, but only a sampling demonstrating how this exclusion extends from the works of the late 1960's and early 1970's, ground breaking at the time and now considered foundational, all the way up to the most recently published major studies. Given the lack of an English translation of Adorno's book on Kierkegaard prior to 1989, not to mention the lack of attention paid to this book by the scholarship preceding them, Mackey's and Thompson's books might be more justified in their complete omission of Adorno than those published after the publication of the English translation. Perhaps the really unjust treatment of Adorno is committed by those who do mention his name but only quickly to dismiss him within the space of a few sentences. Cf., for example: Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), xiii, 70; Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), n. 10, 188; and Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), 9.

³⁹ The same cannot be said of the German scholarship. Although perhaps receiving only slightly more attention in Germany than in the U.K. or the U.S.A., Adorno's assessment of and relation to Kierkegaard

Only as of late (since 1997 to be exact) has this subject appeared in publication at all. Thus far, excepting a handful of customary book reviews marking the 1989 appearance of its English translation,⁴⁰ Adorno's book on Kierkegaard has only been the primary focus of two journal articles,⁴¹ two book chapters,⁴² and a few key paragraphs within two pieces of writing treating broader topics.⁴³ Why an analysis of Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard is not only warranted but also is likely to deepen our understanding of both Kierkegaard and Adorno has been suggested. The conspicuous neglect of Adorno's book, wherein, according to a minority view, we find the most "perspicacious and relevant things that have ever been said about Søren Kierkegaard,"⁴⁴ therefore, demands our focused attention. We will see that the exclusion of Adorno from the world of Kierkegaardian scholarship has been an uncritical one – as a consequence, a defense of

has at least been the topic of one book length work: Hermann Deuser, *Dialektische Theologie: Studien zu Adornos Metaphysik und zum Spätwerk Kierkegaards* (Munich: Grünewald, 1980).

⁴⁰ For example: Peter Fenves, "Image and Chatter: Adorno's Construction of Kierkegaard," book review in *Diacritics* 22.1 (1992): 100-114; Robert Perkins, "Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic," book review in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48.3 (1990): 262-263; Jeanne Schuler, "Adorno's Kierkegaard," book review in *Telos* 82 (1989): 191-196; Liliane Weissberg, "Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic," book review in *Modern Philology* 88.4 (1991): 470-473.

⁴¹ David Sherman, "Adorno's Kierkegaardian Debt," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27.1 (2001): 77-106; Marcia Morgan, "Adorno's Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933," in *The Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 46 (2003), available at www.stolaf.edu/collections/Kierkegaard/newsletter/issue46/4600.htm.

⁴² Geoffrey Hale, "Learning to Read: Adorno, Kierkegaard and *Konstruktion*," in his *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 37-72; John Vignaux Smyth, "Sacrificial Materialism in Kierkegaard and Adorno," in *Idealism without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*, eds. Tilottama Rajan and Arkadi Plotnitsky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 181-202.

⁴³ Kevin Newmark, "Secret Agents: After Kierkegaard's Subject," in *Modern Language Notes* 112.5 (1997): 720-721; John Vignaux Smyth, "Art, Eroticism, and Sadomasochistic Sacrifice in Søren Kierkegaard and Isak Dinesen," in *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 180-181.

⁴⁴ Newmark, "Secret Agents: After Kierkegaard's Subject," 721.

Kierkegaard that directly engages the substantive import of Adorno's critique has never been undertaken.

The alacrity with which most Kierkegaard scholars ignore and/or dismiss Adorno is only matched in severity by the hostility with which such dismissals are regularly voiced.⁴⁵ Merold Westphal goes so far as to bestow upon Adorno's work the honor of being "probably the most irresponsible book ever written on Kierkegaard."⁴⁶ In like manner, on the occasion of the publication of its English translation, Robert Perkins states: "More than thirty years ago I credited my finding nothing in this work I could use ... to the limits of my German. Now I realize that I faulted myself unnecessarily."⁴⁷ One expects one-sided statements of disrepute to be supported by cogent argumentation and detailed analysis; in this case, however, such formalities are apparently deemed unnecessary. Superfluous because, as Westphal continues: "[Adorno's book] ranges through the pseudonymous writings and assigns to Kierkegaard the views of first this and then that pseudonym, giving us a construction ... of a thoroughly fictitious

⁴⁵ This charge of enmity is not meant to be unduly provocative and is not speculative. It has been documented. Sherman, in a footnote to his article, writes, "I should indicate that there is a good deal of hostility toward Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard ... (Indeed, I had the chance personally to encounter some of this hostility when presenting an earlier draft of this paper at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy);" "Adorno's Kierkegaardian Debt," n.9, 103. Additionally, Smyth writes, again in a footnote, "Adorno does not enjoy the best of reputations among Kierkegaardians: at the March 2001 International Kierkegaard Forum at Augusta State University, for example, the Derridean Mark Dooley made it publicly clear he thought Adorno one of the very worst guides to understanding Kierkegaard. Roger Poole, in private conversation, seemed similarly to regard Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard as predictably Marxist and uninteresting;" "Art, Eroticism, and Sadomasochistic Sacrifice," n.1, 196.

⁴⁶ Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996), 9.

⁴⁷ Perkins, 263. It should be noted that both Westphal and Perkins are respected and highly influential scholars within the field of Kierkegaard studies. Perkins' influence is especially noteworthy as he has been and remains the editor of the book series entitled the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* – with 21 volumes in print and more on the way, each volume containing a large collection of articles on one or two of Kierkegaard's works. The point being that students and scholars alike listen attentively to what these prominent figures have to say.

Kierkegaard.”⁴⁸ With almost no exception, this claim is invoked to justify the expeditious dismissal Adorno’s critical reading has received.⁴⁹ Adorno is accused of mistreating Kierkegaard’s corpus by assigning the views of his pseudonyms to Kierkegaard himself. This accusation has its origin in Perkins’ harsh review: “... Adorno does not respect, much less discuss, the literary qualities of Kierkegaard’s writings ... he does not even suspect that there is a difference between Kierkegaard and his literary persona or his pseudonyms ... [he] distorts Kierkegaard’s works.”⁵⁰ It seems then that engaging the complexity of Adorno’s critique is unnecessary – for his method disqualifies his results, or, at least, by attacking the method we avoid having to address his results. Given that there is no evidence to the contrary, that is, not one refutation of Adorno’s critique that speaks to the substance of his claims with more than a preteritive sentence or two, then

⁴⁸ Westphal, 9.

⁴⁹ The one exception has been in the strategy adopted by Marcia Morgan. Despite her admission that Adorno’s book “provoked two of the most important issues of Kierkegaard scholarship: the relationship between the aesthetic and religious life possibilities put forth in the heterogeneous writings of Kierkegaard ... and the question of the extent to which a critical theory of society is made manifest in these writings,” she argues that “there are many reasons Adorno’s *Kierkegaard* cannot be construed as a convincing interpretation.” The reasons she provides, however, do not involve directly engaging Adorno’s criticism; in short, her strategy consists in situating Adorno’s writing within its cultural and social context. When this is done, we see that “Adorno’s claims are related more to his fervor against the onslaught of the totalitarian manifestations of his day, and the loss of individuality with its distinct experiential contents that was the consequence of these manifestations,” than to Kierkegaard’s actual writings. Yet, she does not explain how; in fact, she never even bothers to mention any specific aspect of Adorno’s interpretation; rather, she points our attention to the following: the bonds being established by some intellectuals with National Socialism at this time; the questionable quality of the German translations of Kierkegaard available; Adorno’s disapproval of Heidegger’s ontological appropriation of Kierkegaard; and to the possibility that Adorno’s agitation with the object of critique (apparently no longer Kierkegaard’s works, but the intellectual culture of the time) resulted in an incoherency in his presentation. While indeed informative, this approach amounts to nothing more than a thickening of the smoke occluding the necessity of addressing Adorno’s interpretation directly. Morgan, “Adorno’s Reception of Kierkegaard: 1929-1933.”

⁵⁰ He continues, “Adorno ignores every literary issue that must be addressed before one can even begin to sort out Kierkegaard’s work” Perkins, 262-263. The idea that an account of the literary elements of Kierkegaard’s works must be adequately addressed before one can begin to comprehend their meaning has been, more or less, regarded as canonical since Louis Mackey claimed in 1971 that “Søren Kierkegaard is not, in the usual acceptance of these words, a philosopher or a theologian, but a poet,” *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, ix. This was regarded as a revolutionary idea at the time.

this does seem to be the stance endorsed by the greater part of Kierkegaardian scholarship.⁵¹

This position assumes the unquestionable veracity of the following claims: Adorno's method of interpretation considers the viewpoints articulated by Kierkegaard's various pseudonyms to be those of Kierkegaard himself; an interpretative approach to Kierkegaard's work that ascribes the views of his pseudonyms to Kierkegaard himself is necessarily in error. Yet, as the chapters of this study will demonstrate, the truthfulness of both these declarations is doubtful – thus the reading Adorno's reading has received, will itself be shown to be in error. One factor at work here and significant enough to warrant mentioning now is Adorno's abstruse style of writing. Perhaps, he has been simply misunderstood. His prose dispenses with the transparency of syllogistic argumentation in favor of an idiosyncratic and obscure presentation of fragments of arguments. Conclusions without premises and premises with no evident conclusions, all arranged with little regard for syntactical convention, are the hallmarks of Adorno's mosaic style. Additionally, as Bernstein explains:

Fragmentary writing is modernist, its logical and syntactical dislocations the cognitive equivalent of dissonance in music. Fragmentary writing functions through the multiplication of logically distinct perspectives, each of which is something of a theoretical caricature. Through the multiplication of diverse perspectives a complex portrait of the phenomenon in question is produced. This procedure stands somewhere

⁵¹ In fairness to Perkins, he does make a quick attempt to speak to Adorno's claim that the self is "an objectless inwardness" in Kierkegaard's thinking. He does not develop an argument and indicates to do so would take a lengthy analysis. He just notes that "if [Kierkegaard] had desired to speak of the world, he would have discussed the general theories of physics as they existed in his time with which he was well acquainted," and that Kierkegaard's self is "relating constantly ... to others in seduction, marriage, love, parenting, and social institutions." Perkins, 262-263. However, the main point here is to bring attention to the fact that after Perkins' review, few have questioned the illegitimacy of Adorno's interpretation and for the very same reason initially given by Perkins – his mistreatment of the pseudonyms.

between Nietzsche's call for many eyes, many perspectives, and the phenomenological procedure of eidetic variation...⁵²

Adorno's detractors have missed the implications of this method of conceptual collage. They have overlooked how the content of Adorno's thought is inseparable from its contextualization within a framework wherein multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives derive their meaning from the inharmonious relations existing between them (a lack of harmony, however, that is not unmusical).⁵³ Ironically, they have not noticed how strikingly analogous, both in form and function, Adorno's approach is to Kierkegaard's own. Indeed, the description given above serves equally well for either thinker. Kierkegaard's various pseudonyms serve to express unique perspectives whose full meanings are inseparable from their inter-contextualization: the young man and the judge in *Either/Or*, for example, each represent a caricaturizing of the positions of an esthete and an ethicist respectively, and as the fictitious editor indicates, one, the 'either', is comprehensible only when followed by the other, the 'or.'⁵⁴ Therefore, while their writing and thinking may seem quite disparate at first glance, Adorno's conceptual density contrasting with Kierkegaard's diffusive prose, upon closer inspection it is clear that their stylistic differences only belie their formal affinity. Moreover, as we have seen, they both wrote in such a way that the meaning of their works requires the reader to make

⁵² J.M. Bernstein, from the introduction to his translation of a collection of Adorno's essays titled *The Culture Industry*, trans. and ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 8.

⁵³ Thus Perkins' claim that "Adorno misses all the subtlety, polemic and irony of Kierkegaard," can be seen as a direct result of Perkins' failure to catch all the subtlety and irony of Adorno. This failure produces his frustration: "After struggling with this book for fruitless hours, I found that if one reads the last sentence in each subdivision of a chapter, one may sometimes, but not always, find a point ... so much for the stylistic qualities of this text." Perkins, 262-263.

⁵⁴ "...when one has said A, one must also say B." Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, part 2, 13.

an active contribution to its construction.⁵⁵ Inattention to these many convergences resulted in the misreading and uncritical rejection of Adorno's work on Kierkegaard.⁵⁶

Not everyone, however, has permitted his reading to be compromised by presupposing Adorno's to be erroneous. Among the few comprising this minority,⁵⁷ Geoffrey Hale's work is the most substantial. In his recent book, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, all thirty-five pages of one of five chapters is devoted to an analysis of Adorno's interpretation. As a means of concluding this section, let us briefly turn our attention to a few of Hale's insights that will serve, whether directly or indirectly, as springboards for this proposed study of Kierkegaard's aesthetic. By means of a rigorous textual analysis, Hale is able to support his claim that Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard is best read as a critique of those interpreters who have unknowingly read an idealist notion of the self into Kierkegaard's writings – not then of Kierkegaard himself, whose writings, in actuality, by means of their aesthetic use of language, vigorously resist such interpretations. In contradistinction from the “free play” and “dissociation” bestowed upon Kierkegaard's aesthetic by post-modernistic interpretations, Hale reads Adorno's analysis as demonstrative of how Kierkegaard's aesthetic functions throughout his

⁵⁵ Cf. pages 13-14 above.

⁵⁶ There are a few points to be developed that require lengthy analysis but nonetheless deserve mentioning here as they may serve to shed some clarifying light on this discussion. Adorno does not arbitrarily assign the views of the pseudonyms to Kierkegaard; yet, if one is not attuned to the subtle sophistication of his analysis, it may appear that this is the case. His approach to the pseudonyms certainly differs from most – as does his approach, in general, to Kierkegaard. In short, he interprets Kierkegaard as a philosopher who has an unusual means of philosophizing not as a poet whose poetry is philosophical – a subtle but not insignificant difference. As Jeanne Schuler states in her review, the pseudonyms in Adorno's reading are seen to be “commissioned to illustrate ideas, not acquire their own life” Schuler, 193. Although it may be difficult to locate the authoritative Kierkegaard behind the poetic undermining of his own authority, Adorno does not allow his poetic artifice to shield Kierkegaard from criticism. Perhaps, this aggressive stance is what so many have found objectionable. As he writes on the first page of his book, “interpretation of philosophy as poetry ... by tearing philosophy away from the standard of the real ... deprives it of the possibility of adequate criticism.” Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 3.

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Hale, John Vignaux Smith, David Sherman and Kevin Newmark. Cf. notes 41-43 above.

writings as the very condition for the possibility of their meaning, in his words, as “the condition of finitude upon which meaning is infinitely founded.”⁵⁸ Nebulous as all this may seem, the possibilities attested to here of territory unexplored within Kierkegaard’s familiar texts is promising enough to merit a critical analysis. Particularly auspicious is how “reading the central importance of Kierkegaard’s philosophy not in terms of the primacy of subjectivity,” but rather as the articulation of “the concept of subjectivity,” reading it as Adorno does, places him squarely in dialogue with the history of philosophy.⁵⁹

This dissertation aims to situate itself within the dialogue between Kierkegaard’s thinking and the philosophical issues out of which his thought was born, through which his thought was sustained, and against which his thought never ceased to struggle. In doing so, it sets out to make a contribution to the vast work on Kierkegaard which precedes it and upon which it admittedly stands. In particular, it hopes to add significantly to our understanding of the meaning of the aesthetic within Kierkegaard’s writings. Adorno’s interpretation and critique of Kierkegaard’s thought has been ignored and/or dismissed by the scholarship for too long and this dismissal has been essentially uncritical. Adorno’s insight into the meaning of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic will be commissioned to seek greater depth in our understanding of Kierkegaard’s relationship with philosophy. If this study performs its task well, then it will contribute to restoring a line of inquiry overlooked in the Anglophone scholarship. If Adorno’s work offers insight into Kierkegaard, we might expect in turn a contribution of the works of

⁵⁸ Hale, 35.

⁵⁹ Hale, 59.

Kierkegaard to understanding Adorno's thought. The primary aim of this study is the former, however, there will be opportunity for the latter as well.

iii. Chapter Outline

The first chapter offers a close reading of two crucial sections of the first half of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*: the aesthete's analysis of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*⁶⁰ and the Seducer's Diary.⁶¹ It shows how the tension definitive of Kierkegaard's aesthetic itself, that between immediacy and reflection,⁶² is represented within these two sections' differing accounts of seduction. Moreover, the relation between the narrator of the diary and the girl who falls victim to his seduction will be suggested to parallel the relation between Kierkegaard and his readers. Both relations will be argued to be pedagogical in nature and productive of a specifically philosophical form of reflection in the seduced and the reader. Thus, within the space of the first chapter, the intertwining of the aesthetic and the intellectual, the links between education and seduction and the aesthetic as productive of the possibility of critical reflection will be introduced as major themes of the dissertation.

Chapter two is devoted to a critical analysis of Adorno's *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*. Here the claim that Adorno's critical reading of Kierkegaard is productive rather than dismissive will be developed in detail. His interpretation will first be shown to reinforce the discoveries made in regard to the aesthetic in chapter one. After exploring the constellational roots of Adorno's philosophy, the analysis turns toward the particular use of imagery in Kierkegaard and Adorno's works.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, "The Immediate Erotic Stages or The Musical-Erotic," in *Either/Or*, part 1, 47-135.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, "The Seducer's Diary," 301-445.

⁶² Cf. pages 2-4 above.

Chapters three and four then test the productivity of Adorno's interpretation by seeking to apply its insights to two key Kierkegaardian texts, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Fear and Trembling*. Chapter three focuses on the themes of anxiety and the demonic as they are developed in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Here, Kierkegaard's notion of freedom undergone in anxiety is tied to the condition of the linguistic subject. Adorno's appropriation of Kant is explored in order to further draw the parallels between Kierkegaard and Adorno. The analysis of the demonic state of inclosing reserve will serve to show how Kierkegaard does recognize the extent to which his thinking is held within the entrapments of idealism that his thought seeks to escape.

In chapter four, the most often quoted section of *Fear and Trembling*, "Problema I: Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,"⁶³ will be subjected to a close analysis. The application of some of Adorno's insights will allow the mythical dimension of Kierkegaard's failed attempt to think the unthinkable faith of Abraham to come to light. Particular attention will be paid to the magnification of the sacrificial relationship between the conceptual and the particular that Kierkegaard's analysis produces. The theme of the productive force of the image is further explored as it appears in Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*.

The study concludes with a methodical comparison of how communication is addressed in Kierkegaard and Adorno's writings. Their thought is shown to share a common goal: namely the communication of freedom's possibility – a possibility so concrete that its successful conveyance is inseparable from its appropriative enactment by the individual their writings address. To the extent that this communication is

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 54-67.

accomplished, it is by means of that which we will have come to understand the educational capacity of the aesthetic itself.

Chapter I

The Seduction of the Aesthetic in *Either/Or*

Mädchen, Dichter sind, die von euch lernen
das zu *sagen*, was ihr einsam *seid*;
und sie lernen leben an euch Fernen,
wie die Abende an großen Sternen
sich gewöhnen an die Ewigkeit.

Young girls, poets are those who learn from you
how to say what your loneliness is;
and they learn to live at a distance from you,
like the evenings of large stars
become accustomed to the Eternal.

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

Introductory Remarks on the Young Girl

The image of the young girl figures prominently in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, from the Knight of Infinite Resignation's princess in *Fear and Trembling*² to the seduced and abandoned Cordelia of *Either/Or*, from the young man's nameless

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Images: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point Press, 1991), 11-12. I have modified the translation.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & Repetition*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 41-53.

beloved in *Repetition* to the young lady whose poetic recollection occupies the majority of the pages of *Stages on Life's Way*. The young girl's ubiquitous presence evidences the extent to which the authorship is animated by the need to explore the significance of the erotic force she embodies. As one of Kierkegaard's personas phrases it, "... what power is pursuing me with her, from whom I am fleeing and yet do not wish to escape?"³

Kierkegaard's thought is an effacement of the line of division separating the poetic from the philosophical, the aesthetic from the intellectual, and the sensual from the spiritual; as a consequence, like that of all artists, his work requires a muse. Yet, Kierkegaard seemed to understand all too well the insight expressed by the poet in the passage above – again to quote one his personas: "... muses, along with whatever fabulous beings belong to them, do best by keeping their distance."⁴

In the sections of this chapter, the image of the young girl will be shown to be representative of a force, according to Kierkegaard, elemental in nature, resistant to conceptualization and demonically seductive. In addition, we will see that she is not the only marker of the attempted representation of this elemental force, but shares it with a figure who, at first glance, appears her opposite, *Don Giovanni*. From this analysis, an initial understanding of the aesthetic as a principle of conceptual philosophy will be distilled. The role the aesthetic as such a principle plays in Kierkegaard's project of indirect communication will also be developed in such a way that the necessity of a seductive aesthetic moment in a genuinely philosophical education will be revealed.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 211. That Kierkegaard's own broken engagement provided the occasion for his erotic musings cannot be denied; however, it would be foolish, as a consequence, to reduce the significance of his observations to this singular life event. Even if it is an event out of which he constructs a genuine *mythos*, our concern here is to focus attention on the young girl as an ideal archetype, so to speak, and thus as resistant to expression in the actual.

⁴ Kierkegaard, 403.

i: The Aesthete's Intoxicant

Possibility is the intoxicant of the aesthete. The young man known to us only as A, the purported author of the first volume of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, that half responsible for the portrayal of the aesthetic "either" standing in contrast as it does to the ethical "or" of the second volume, states his desire for such with no equivocation:

If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating!⁵

Possibility, as a passionate form of unformed ideality, is something, on the one hand, that the aesthete seeks out as a phenomenon in the world, an event to be encountered; on the other hand, here this encounter is clearly linked to a shift in aesthetic perception implying, as it were, that this possibility is indeed everywhere if only one knew how to see it. An essential dilemma of the aesthetic young man is captured in this ambiguity between knowledge and perception. The reflection of possibility, the aesthete's favored experience, is, one might say, the source of philosophical reflection insofar as knowledge has as its inspiration the as yet unknown and unformed. Aesthetic reflection cannot sustain itself but has its source outside of itself in the encounter with the possible – it needs the rejuvenation of the occasion.

In *Either/Or*, two images are at work as such occasions of possibility: the music of Mozart and the nubile female. Their fullest representation is expressed in extremes, and, as a result, these images attain an almost mythical status and function throughout the book. The author celebrates the communicative *pathos* of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 41.

he claims to rank supreme among all “immortal” works of art.⁶ The nubile one’s ability to elicit erotic longing is displayed with an excess bordering on the pathological throughout the pages of the *commentarius perpetuus* that form the work’s longest chapter, “The Seducer’s Diary.”⁷ Both are figural images of the possibility that is the aesthete’s source of rejuvenation – the object of desire. For now, the focus of our interpretative gaze rests on the young girl. Note the striking similarity in both content and tone between the following and the passage quoted above:

What a reinvigorating [*foryngende*] power a young girl has – not the freshness of the morning air, not the sighing of the wind, not the coolness of the sea, not the fragrance of wine, its aroma – nothing in the world has this reinvigorating [*foryngende*] power.⁸

This observation is attributed to Johannes the seducer, for whom seduction is art, and whose diary advances itself as a recollection of this art’s masterpiece.⁹ He further underscores the intoxicating state of the aesthetic experience of possibility. It receives a

⁶ Kierkegaard, 51.

⁷ Kierkegaard, 302.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 351.

⁹ *Either/Or* is a pseudonymous work. It is also polynomial. For our current purposes, a detailed analysis of the multi-layered authorship’s significance is not necessary. However, a familiarity with the overall pseudonymous structure of the book is indispensable. Kierkegaard, of course, stands as the puppet-master, so to speak behind the screen of the work’s authorial personas. *Victor Eremita* is the fictitious editor of the entire work and author of its introduction. There he details how the book to follow is comprised of a large set of papers he found in a hidden compartment of his writing desk. One set of papers he attributes to an aesthetically-minded young man who, because he does not identify himself, *Eremita* designates as A; the other set appear to be comprised of letters written to this young man from an older, ethically-minded person who identifies himself as Judge Wilhelm, although for convenience he designated as B. Within the former papers there is a novella of sorts, “The Seducer’s Diary,” whose authorship A disavows and attributes to an acquaintance of his named Johannes. In addition, in one of B’s letters to A is included a written sermon he claims to have received from an unnamed country priest. Excluding the author then, *Either/Or* is the product of at least five pseudonyms. I do not wish to deprecate the value of the way the work presents its own authorship as a riddle; on the contrary, I believe the pseudonymous status of Kierkegaard’s works is crucial to their meaning – that, as it were, their substance is inseparable from their style. However, working within this framework, I would contend that there is little reason to give much merit to A’s disavowal of the diary. The similarity in the two quotes evidences this well enough. Given that the attempt to treat them as two characters would be more confounding than clarifying, I will not do so here. Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, I will use the following designations interchangeably: the aesthete, A, the seducer, Johannes. Later, the eroticist will be added to this list.

visible figuration in the image of the young girl, a reiteration, then, as a personification. Possibility evidences itself *ex opere operantis*. She has developed a figure.

Consequently, as we will see, the aesthete's passion for the possible finds its proper expression in the pursuit of the erotic and the cultivation of desire. His practice is an intellectualized eroticism; that is to say, his art is as reflective and philosophical as it is immediate and sensual. And this practice is indeed seductive.

The reciprocity of the following statements, the second taken from Johannes, the first from A, should now be apparent: "My soul has lost possibility;" "my soul requires rejuvenation."¹⁰ Placing the explication of the seducer's art aside for now, let us attempt to look closer at an ambiguity mentioned earlier. Possibility cannot be lost in the same way one misplaces the key to one's house nor in the manner of expression involved when one says he has lost his wits. Possession is precluded by anything whose definition involves the exclusion of actuality. The possible cannot be exhausted by the actual and remain itself.¹¹ Although it may appear as if the aesthete's motivation stems from a desire for ownership, to *have* his way with the youthful object of his desire, this is not the

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, 41, 435.

¹¹ The possible as such can never be and remain itself; that is to say, paradoxically, when a possibility comes into existence it, at that very moment, ceases to exist and we might add here, as a consequence, loses its power to intoxicate. The philosopher is well acquainted with the strain undergone by the intellect in its efforts to articulate possibility's actuality, to grasp the truth of paradox, and to explicate how what is not, nonetheless, is. Perhaps this struggle found its highest representation quite early in philosophy's history with Aristotle's defining of motion as potentiality's *entelechia*; after all, as an account of change, the actuality of potentiality as such is compelling only to the extent that we hear in this statement connotations of something more than simple contradiction. And who is to deny the compelling force of Aristotle's thought? Yet any attempt to define this "more" quickly finds itself caught within the same aporetic moment that prevents us from speaking the possible without it ceasing to be itself. Admitting as much, let us propose that this "more" points us toward a recognition of the force of thought itself, its desire, as Kierkegaard elsewhere states it, "to discover something that thought itself cannot think," to affirm the "paradox [as] the passion of thought," and see that "the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow." Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

case. The needs of our aesthete are not those of the simple rake, whose, in Johannes' words, "momentary enjoyment" of a girl is comparable to "rape, even if not outwardly."¹² At the same time, the aesthete's needs cannot be met by any simple girl, but one capable of developing to the point of standing before her own freedom with "clarity and transparency."¹³ Like the finest of wines, possibility must be savored in "slow draughts,"¹⁴ its full sensual appreciation requiring the highest level of respect for its powers. When he states, "I never approach a girl other than as nature's *Venerabile* and first learn from her ... by teaching her again and again what I have learned,"¹⁵ or "I still always approach a young girl with a certain anxiety ... for I sense the eternal power of her nature,"¹⁶ he should be taken at his word. The seducer understands well just to what extent she remains the agency of seduction.¹⁷ The encounter with the girl's image is the occasion for the experience of possibility that poetically sets him "in motion within [him]self." If he is the artist, then she is his model, although she does not sit for pay. She

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 341-342.

¹³ Kierkegaard, 342. The impossibility of owning the source as possibility of the aesthete's form, for lack of a better descriptive category, one could call an experiential idealism, reflects a theme present throughout Kierkegaard's entire authorship; namely, the separation of concrete immediacy from its reflexive meaning to the point where existence itself is understood as the act of their relating. Dialectically expressed, an awareness of the self as the active split between experience and its reflection constitutive of its meaning has as its result a stultified form of consciousness as it has become aware of the abysmal nature of its own freedom. Possibility is now understood to be possible – the possibility of possibility (*cf.* Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. R. Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)) we know through our own *Angst*. Within *Either/Or*, the Judge's position is representative of the attempt to own oneself and close this gap through the strength of self-determination. To determine one's way versus to create one's way. From the perspective of the aesthete, this is only possible for those willing and capable to fool themselves into thinking one can construct the meaning of experience and then come to experience it as if its source had not been oneself.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 334.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 391.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, 435

¹⁷ *Cf.* Plato, *Phaedrus*, Socrates' second speech.

provides experiential evidence of an ideality the communication of which is both the source and goal of aesthetic production. The aesthete seeks to elongate the experience of inspiration, “to come as close as possible to the limit [*Stregen*].”¹⁸ This is the first of many indications we will find of an experiential knowledge of possibility extending beyond the realm of conceptuality – aesthetic knowledge in the form of an awareness of the point beyond which conceptual knowledge does not extend.

Five years after the publication of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard penned a short essay with the title “Crisis in the Life of an Actress.” The following year, 1848, it was published in the literary periodical *The Fatherland*.¹⁹ This minor piece of commentary contains Kierkegaard’s most direct attempt to account for the enchanting power of the young girl’s image. This takes place within a discussion of those attributes responsible for the success of a young actress’ performance in the role of Shakespeare’s Juliet. She is assigned a list of traits that both accentuate and clarify the importance of her non-conceptual role. Lending support to the equation of the young girl with the ideal of the possible is his failure to achieve a direct description of the power with which she is endowed. This is not due to any lack of perspicuity. In a passage worth quoting at length, he expresses it thus:

She makes her *début*, then, in her seventeenth year. She is in possession of – well, what it is that she possesses is very difficult to define, just because it is something indeterminate, which nevertheless asserts itself overwhelmingly and demands an unconditional response. There is no use

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 335. Translation slightly modified.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard’s model, Johanne Luise Heiberg, was the star of the Danish stage during his lifetime. She was the wife of Johan Ludvig Heiberg, the preeminent man of letters whose influence was responsible for the popularity of Hegelian philosophy in Denmark at the time. The occasion for the article is Fru Heiberg’s performance in the role of Juliet twenty years after making her *début* in the same role as a seventeen-year-old girl. For a concise and highly informative sketch of the background to the essay, see Stephen Crites’ introduction to his translation. Søren Kierkegaard, *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Stephen Crites (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967).

in even the dullest, most peevish person hardening himself against it, he must respond.²⁰

The inescapability of a response *vis-à-vis* this presentation of indeterminacy, the occurrence of which is inseparable from the very being of the actress, is matched in intensity only by the impossibility of any response to represent the phenomenon in a determinate manner. It seems that whatever the source of her power to captivate, it can only be referred to indirectly, only spoken of, that is, by means of its effects. The principle effect is a disruption in one's capability to understand and control one's own experience. This is analogous to the inexplicable disruption of the cognitive faculties engendered by an encounter with the object of desire. There will be much more to say in regard to such an encounter; for now, let's delve further into what Kierkegaard tells us about the young girl in his description of the young actress.

In order to "come a little closer to defining this indefinable possession," specific qualities are attributed to it. The first one he provides, *luck (Lykke)*, is surely the oddest. Her luck, contrary to how it seems *prima facie*, is not indicative of the circumstances of her life that have overtly contributed to her success. The right connections and upbringing, her fortunate beauty, innate predilections and the like, these are not possessions constitutive of her luck; rather she has luck precisely to the extent that "she is possessed by it."²¹ Thus, the occurrence of this difficult to articulate possession of hers cannot result from the meeting of certain conditions, the probability of which could, perhaps, even be calculated. The most that can be said is that in this indeterminate game

²⁰ Kierkegaard, 72. Perhaps we should note the parallel established here between the object of desire (the young girl) and Kierkegaard's God (whose indeterminacy demands such a response).

²¹ Kierkegaard, 73.

she is and will remain on a lucky-streak. Three more attributes are proposed:

youthfulness, soulfulness, rapport with tension of the stage. About *soulfulness*

(*Sjælfuldhed*) he writes:

This means that in the temper of her immediate passion she is attuned to thought and idea; that her still unreflective inwardness is essentially in league with ideality; that every touch of a thought or idea strikes a note, giving a full-tone resonance; that she is an original, specific sensitivity.²²

How such a connection between ideality and immediacy is performed is not stated directly. Yet, the use of musical metaphors is not accidental. This passage is in the same spirit as many in *Either/Or* regarding Mozart's opera. There we learn that "the sensuous in its elemental originality," as the "most abstract idea conceivable," can only be presented in the medium of music.²³ Since *Don Giovanni* has the sensuous as its subject matter, it is said to be "altogether musical" in such a way that it "discloses its own innermost nature as it discloses the idea."²⁴ This parallel strongly suggests that the actresses' *soulfulness*, her attunement to ideality, is inseparable from her performance on stage. The concrete actualization it receives therein is responsible for the conveyance of a form of ideality, knowledge of which is captured well in the colloquial, "you know it when you see it." Once the music stops or the curtain falls such a concrete presentation of ideality is, exactly at that moment, no longer.

Perhaps this ideality is the experience of possibility sought by the aesthete. As a means of continuing the analysis of his predilection for the erotic, a few passages from *Either/Or* on this elusive ideal merit attention. Evoking the experience of being struck by

²² Kierkegaard, 76-77.

²³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 56.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, 57.

love at first sight, Johannes writes: “If at first sight a girl does not make such an impression on a person that she awakens the ideal, then ordinarily the actuality is not especially desirable;” however, if the ideal is put into motion by this encounter, then “no matter how experienced a person is he usually is rather overwhelmed,” even to the point of possessing “supernatural powers.”²⁵ To seek the erotic encounter is to seek a sudden and disruptive encounter with love wherein “to see her and to love her being one and the same.”²⁶ It is from the poetic well of transfiguration attending such an experience that the aesthete draws the ideal of possibility by means of which he is rejuvenated. It should be evident, assuming such experiences to be possible, that they would be decidedly rare and extraordinary. Not even the aesthete can fall in love everyday. In undergoing “the rare good fortune of falling in love again,” he considers himself “a favorite of the gods;” in confessing that “this is something that cannot be elicited by skill or study,” that “it is a gift,” he underscores the inexorability displayed by erotic desire’s relation to the will.²⁷ Conjointly, when he states, “I do want to see how long it [erotic love] can be sustained,” he communicates awareness of the evanescent nature of its “singular magic.”²⁸ While writing *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard expressed it in his journal thus:

The schism: something is true in poetry that is untrue in life, is canceled. All romantic love is essentially deceit. The seducer does not lack the erotic, wants to sacrifice everything for his idea, but he does not believe in the durability of love, it is his heresy; but the same is true of any hero in a novel ...²⁹

²⁵ Kierkegaard, 335.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, 501.

²⁷ About the theme of love’s singularity, *cf.* Kierkegaard, 335.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, 334.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, 501.

The result is the state of tension within which the aesthete finds himself – a tension, apposite to a form of life, the poetic transformation of which must take place within a consciousness well aware of the transitory, if not illusory, nature of its source.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that love, for the aesthete, is only a lie. Even the most satiated of sensualists is not exempted from the response demanded by a sudden encounter with the beloved as “the image [of the] only force in this world in dissolution that has kept the power to bring us back to fervent life.”³⁰ The efficacy of the artist’s sorcery, the seducer’s art, is not self-sustaining. The artist must be in love, yet, he must learn to harness desire to the reins of his own reflective creations. To do this he must hold himself as close as possible to the limit separating his engulfment in the immediacy of erotic desire from his detached awareness of this desire’s futility. He lives this tension, if, that is, he wishes to know ideality in the experiential form of possibility. For to experience the incomprehensible “lightness of a young girl” that “mocks the law of gravity,”³¹ one must know the gravity expressed in these words: “how beautiful it is to be in love; how interesting it is to know that one is in love. This is the difference.”³²

This tension also appears within the analysis of the young actress, whom we have not forgotten and to whose consideration we now return. Continuing with the description, Kierkegaard states, “*that she is in the right rapport with the tension of the stage*” is signified within the expression of her “indefinable possession.” This signification of such we learn is only provided *via negativa*; that is, it evidences itself in

³⁰ Georges Bataille, “The Sorcerers Apprentice,” trans. Betsy Wing, *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 18.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 332.

³² Kierkegaard, 334.

there being not “a trace of anxiety [*Angst*]” discernable in her performance.³³ Anxiety’s importance throughout Kierkegaard’s writings cannot be overstated; in short, it is “the dizziness of freedom;”³⁴ it is “freedom’s disclosure to itself in possibility.”³⁵ Thus, its presence here is indeed notable and warrants the inference that freedom and possibility form an intimate relation with the erotic, and here, specifically with the puissance of the young girl’s image. That anxiety is the attendant “in all erotic enjoyment,”³⁶ and that, for Kierkegaard, “anxiety is always conceived in the direction of freedom”³⁷ itself establishes a fecund tension for future analysis. While the young actress does not display any sign of anxiety in her performance, she is not without anxiety over the performance. On the contrary, we read that her anxiety is great while “in her study or in the wings [of the stage],” that is, while anticipating the possibilities of the performance, an extension of the phenomenon commonly known as stage fright. Yet, as soon as the curtain rises she becomes “light as a bird” under the weight of the performance, out of which “the heaviness of the burden is continually transformed into lightness.”³⁸ Again, the laws of gravity are defied by the young girl and her unfathomable possession of indeterminacy.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, 76.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 61. Yet, it receives its most analytical treatment in the *Concept of Anxiety*. The fourth chapter of this present study explores this work in depth. Our actress is paralleled there by the genius: “in the moment of danger, the genius is stronger than ever. His anxiety ... lies in the moment before and after the danger.” 101. Moreover, From the context of the present discussion of erotic femininity, the remarks found there regarding anxiety as a “feminine” phenomenon, even as “sweet,” take on added significance. 61.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, 111.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, 71.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, 66. Actually this statement from *The Concept of Anxiety* is preceded with the qualification, “in this work.”

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, 78.

The actress' anxiety, when present, "marvelously manifests itself as potency."³⁹ This is best captured in the discussion of the one attribute not yet mentioned – her *youthfulness* (*Ungdommelighed*). "First and foremost, it [her *youthfulness*] is the play of vital powers."⁴⁰ Similar, we are told, to that restless energy one finds in gifted children, but not in the sense of a "finitude run riot." As suspected then, the analysis of the young actress informs our understanding of the aesthete's relation to possibility. The intoxicant from which his existence receives its rejuvenation is a force of fecundity, one of those "forces whose emergence forms the content of life," a force of which he feeds like a vampire. Her *youthfulness* is "an indefinable treasure," indicative of a restless anxiety:

... restlessness in the pregnant sense, the restlessness of infinity, the joyous vivacious originality which stirs the waters with rejuvenating, refreshing, healing powers, such restlessness signifies something further, something very great: it signifies the first flaring of an essential genius.⁴¹

Additionally, this force's restlessness is said to be "elemental ... like the winds or the sounds of nature." It is "an elemental fact of nature."⁴² Is the youthfulness of the girl expressive of a fertility that erotic desire naturally seeks out? Possibly, but if so, then her lover, her seducer, would express the seeding of this desire. Together, then, they would produce and sustain a world – yet, it must be kept in mind, an entirely aesthetic world, comprised of poetic idealization. At the same time, the poetic as a constitutive element

³⁹ Kierkegaard remarks in passing here that this anxiety of the stage that only happens while off of it is characteristic of artistic greatness in general. In regard to this artist, he writes, "for the more powers he possesses, the greater is his anxiety so long as he is outside the tension which exactly corresponds to his powers." Kierkegaard, 78.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, 78.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, 74.

⁴² Kierkegaard, 75.

of the real should not be quickly disparaged. The following words of Kierkegaard's too should be kept in mind: "All poetry is a *glorification* (i.e., transfiguration) [*Forherligelse?*] of life by way of its clarification [*Forklarelse*] (in that it is explained, illuminated, developed, etc.)."⁴³

The potential reciprocity of ideality and its concrete expression presents a challenge of communication. The musical relation between the master seducer and the young girl arises out of Kierkegaard's authorship as an image of a certain ineffable ideality. The chase after this ideality is the distinguishing stylistic mark of his intellectual aesthetics – an ideality the truth of which is only communicated, if at all, indirectly via the image left in the wake of the intellects' attempt and failure to close off the possible within the confines of the comprehensible.⁴⁴ This leads to a consideration of the reciprocal relation between the object of desire, the youthful feminine in *Either/Or*, and the force of the desire she provokes, whose un-representability is presented nonetheless by the music that is *Don Giovanni*. In this light, they appear to be two different images through which the same force is expressed: immediate sensuality as a force of natural desire. They say the lover hears violins when his sight falls upon his beloved for the very first time. The sensual passion thus ignited becomes itself the instrument of the aesthete. Erotic love dwells within experience's dimension of tonality; for this reason, access to the aesthetic requires the development of the ear.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *JP*, 1:136. Available at Past Masters 1.55 (II A 352) and also cited in Walsh, *Living Poetically*, 169.

⁴⁴ The logic of failure as aesthetic communication – this image of futility before the unknown in all of our desire to own it through knowing it might be an apt characterization of all of Kierkegaard's aesthetic oeuvre.

ii: The Speculative Ear⁴⁵

That music plays a role of consequence in Kierkegaard's thought is rarely noted. While it is difficult to imagine this oversight stemming from ignorance of the fact; at the same time, the musical dimension of his thought is not so easily seen. In fact, it could be argued that it cannot be seen at all – only heard. Its role extends beyond that of its direct thematic treatment; that is to say, there is an inherent musical dimension in his writings that stylistically contribute to their power of communicative indirection. Kierkegaard's thought is fundamentally musical, even if its subject matter is only irregularly music.⁴⁶ When the 'musicality' of Kierkegaard's writings is mentioned, it should bring to mind Kierkegaard's elaborate and sophisticated use of language, with all of the rhetorical ploys, poetic devices, multi-faceted trickery, which, taken as a whole, are commonly referred to as the components of his indirect style. In analog, the reader's receptivity to

⁴⁵ The specific origin of this phrase is obscure. In his essay on Hegel, "Skoteinos," Adorno writes: "... one must read Hegel by describing along with him the curves of his intellectual movement, by playing his ideas with the speculative ear as though they were musical notes." In the introduction to her translation of this essay, Sherry Weber Nicholson claims "reading with the speculative ear ... derives originally from Kierkegaard." If a strict understanding of the word derived is applied, then she is correct to say that Adorno's concept of the speculative ear has its source in his understanding of Kierkegaard. However, it is important to note that Kierkegaard never himself directly used these words; at least, the failure of my efforts to locate their occurrence in his writings, including the journals, have led me to this conclusion. Nicholson's failure to specify how Adorno derived the concept from Kierkegaard gives the false impression that here Adorno is adopting Kierkegaard's words. It is my contention that the concept of a "speculative ear" captures well the unusual type of participatory reading Kierkegaard's texts require of their reader. Indeed, as we will see, within the pages of *Either/Or* such a concept is indirectly developed and, once noted, even appears to be among the primary themes of the book. If Adorno's invention of the term is a product of his reading of Kierkegaard, given that in the passage above it is Hegel that is the topic of investigation, then it could be that Adorno is advocating, again indirectly, learning how to read Hegel from Kierkegaard. I am going to steal the concept of a speculative ear, stated by Adorno and likely developed out of his understanding of Kierkegaard, in my own treatment of Kierkegaard. Its obscurity requires that I clearly state from whom it is that I borrow. Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xxviii.

⁴⁶ Out of the sixty-two entries listed under the topic of music in the Hongs' *Cumulative Index*, only seven are from texts published after the two volumes comprising *Either/Or*. Nathaniel Hong, Kathryn Hong, Regine Prenzel-Guthrie, *Cumulative Index to Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 221.

this style might be properly thought of as an actualization of an ability to hear this music. The treatment music receives in *Either/Or* is unmatched, in both the detail with which it is analyzed and the subtlety with which it is deployed as a means of indirection. The former is found within the lengthy study of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* that forms the chapter titled "The Immediate Erotic Stages Or The Musical Erotic."⁴⁷ The latter, however, a style rather than a subject of inquiry, permeates the entirety of the work. In an effort to extend and clarify the analysis begun in the previous section of the reciprocal relation between ideality and its concretion, desire and its object, and now between music and language, this section will take both aspects of the text's musicality as objects of its concern.

The privileged status of the text's musicality is suggested on the very first page of the book's preface. The fictitious editor, *Victor Eremita*, in no uncertain terms, lets us know his favored sense:

Gradually, then, hearing became my most cherished sense, for just as the voice is the disclosure of inwardness incommensurable with the exterior, so the ear is the instrument that approaches this inwardness, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated. Consequently, every time I found a contradiction between what I saw and what I heard, my doubt was confirmed and my zeal for observation increased.⁴⁸

That the ear became an instrument in confirming the doubt expressed in the opening line of the book, a doubt expressed in the form of a question addressed to the reader, is the reason *Eremita* is compelled to favor the ear over the eye. The opening interrogative is rhetorical in the vernacular sense of assuming or suggesting its answer: "It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 45-136.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, 3.

philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer.”⁴⁹ While there is a conspicuous Hegelian undercurrent contained in this opening, that a reader need not be a philosopher to gather a sense of the meaning here is evident in the sentences to follow.⁵⁰ Turning immediately away from such overt abstraction, the question is framed within a referential matrix of personal experience. Hearing is the means by which disturbing secrets, the existence of which are hidden and potentially belied by a person’s exterior appearances, reveal themselves in the uncertain tonality of a voice. It is through the ear that any conflict between the inward state of an individual resounds as tonal uncertainty against the validity of the outer. The crucial distinction between the intended and actual meaning of a statement constitutive of irony can often only be detected in the tonal contrast expressed between the words and the manner with which they are spoken. The repercussions of this last point in relation to language’s relative ability or inability to communicate experience is certainly not lost on Kierkegaard.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 3.

⁵⁰ The translators are accordingly correct in referring the reader by footnote to Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Of course, Kierkegaard’s relationship to Hegel is too intricate and complex to summarize effectively. I am afraid that attempts to do so have led to misunderstandings of not only Kierkegaard’s thought but also that of Hegel. If obliged to do so in relation to this passage, it may be sufficient to note that because the book has personal existence as its subject matter and is not a philosophical treatise, the stab at Hegel opening the book, the question itself, is answered by the subject matter of the book as a whole. While there may be no difference between the inner and the outer from the standpoint of Hegelian logic, in terms of my own personal and social existence there is indeed frequently much experienced disparity between the two. For a concise, although certainly obscure, example of Hegel’s thoughts on the topic see the third division of the third chapter of the second section of the second book of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, entitled “Relation of Outer and Inner.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), 523-528.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard’s dissertation was titled *The Concept of Irony With Constant Reference to Socrates*. In it he dissects the operations of Socratic irony to reveal its dependency on something akin to a disparity between the interior of experience and the exterior of that experiences’ linguistic expression implied in this analysis. He then proceeds to analyze and criticize Hegel’s appropriation of irony in his work of the negative. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

The beginning of *Either/Or* puts into motion a proliferation of equivocations the tension of which is never fully resolved. That the inner and the outer are frequently at odds has repercussions extending into every facet of the text's reading. Kierkegaard seductively warns as he entices. He hints that there may be a secretive knowledge buried between the lines of what follows; in this way, he dares the reader to attempt its uncovering. Conversely and simultaneously, it is implied that in what follows the conflict between the inner and the outer will be demonstrated, even intensified by means of its stylistic enactment – hence, it would be a mistake to give it chase as if it could be uncovered and known conceptually. Yet, that it could be somehow heard is strongly suggested. A discordant chord is what the text's use of language aims to strike such that the receptive reader hears its meaning clearly while remaining incapable of its articulation. In order to achieve this, it must, as the aesthete phrases it, “make manifest the impotence of language” through the exercise of a “linguistic excess.”⁵² That the issue is one of communication and that it is the limitations of language that must be surpassed for the communication the text seeks to establish *Eremita* states thus:

A priest who hears confessions is separated by a grillwork from the person making confession; he does not see them, he only hears. As he listens, he gradually forms a picture of the other's outward appearance corresponding to what he hears; thus he finds no contradiction. It is different, however, when one sees and hears simultaneously but sees a grillwork between oneself and the speaker.⁵³

Are we the priest or the confessor? If the only impression one could form of another's outward appearance came in through the ears rather than the eyes, if one were effectively blind to all exterior impressions, then the image produced by the imagination

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 85.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, 3.

corresponding to this voice could not be mistaken. Strictly speaking, it could not be correct either, due to the permanent exclusion of an exterior criterion upon which any such judgment could be based. However, we are not the priest; rather, our position is closer to that of the confessor with one crucial difference: there is no priest among us to whom we could confess.

In our attempts to communicate our own particular and concrete experiences with one another, we are dependent upon the “grillwork” of language. It is both the means of our connectivity and the source of our ultimate isolation. Words, in and of themselves, are the simplest forms of conceptual abstraction. They are, therefore, objects seen by the mind’s eye and, as such, bear no distinguishing mark to identify them as uniquely one’s own. The communicative act of the words being spoken, however, is not seen but heard. The particularity of the saying, what is heard, invariably conflicts with the generality of what is said, what is seen.⁵⁴ Thus the conflict between the inner and the outer appears to be rooted in the dilemma of accounting for the communication of particularity *vis-à-vis* the acknowledgment of the impossibility of conceptually representing such an account. The expression of this insight requires a type of writing that renders conspicuous its own limitations, a type of writing that seeks to play itself like an instrument:

I shall, however, continually track down the musical in the idea, the situation, etc., and explore it by listening, and when I have brought the reader to the point of being so musically receptive that he seems to hear the music although he hears nothing, then I shall have finished my task, then I shall fall silent, then I shall say to the reader, as I say to myself: Listen.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ This is similar to Emmanuel Levinas’ distinction between the saying and the said as explicated in his *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 86.

The efficaciousness of the musicality of the text is thus contingent upon the receptivity of the reader. A musical writing requires a musical reading; it enlists, that is, the aesthetic sensibilities of its audience. We are being pointed here in the direction of considering the possibility of a non-discursive and non-conceptual knowledge. This concept of reading with the ear as well as the eyes directs us toward a consideration of the possibility of a non-discursive, non-conceptual, experiential form of knowledge. The acquisition of the “attentive erotic ear” allows for the experience of the disparity between the inner and the outer that, for Kierkegaard, comprises an irreducible problem of existence.

A non-discursive knowledge resists direct linguistic formulation; as the aesthete puts it in regard to an understanding of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, if one is not capable of gathering an understanding of this grand seducer by listening, one is, thereby, altogether incapable of understanding him.⁵⁶ This point should be stressed. Nothing, essentially speaking, is known of the opera outside of the immediate impact the music makes upon the listener during its performance. This does not, however, necessitate that we remain silent. It does require that anything said about the opera overtly acknowledge its inadequacy, incompleteness, and its limitations. Such a claim thus points beyond itself by recognizing and affirming its failure to deliver effectively its intended content. Its expressiveness is successful precisely to the extent that it fails to express. This is a pattern that repeats itself throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship.⁵⁷ In order to elucidate the significance of this paradox, an examination of the relationship between music and language is necessary, of how it can be said that “music, understood in a certain way, is a

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, 103.

⁵⁷ The clearest exposition of the communicate power of failure is to be found in *Fear and Trembling*. See chapter four of this present study for a detailed treatment of this book that shows how this form of rhetorical argumentation works.

language” and, at one and the same time, that “where language leaves off [one finds] the musical.”⁵⁸

As mediums of sensual expression, language and music are the only two to address themselves to the ear. It is, in part, for this reason that we can speak of the musicality of language and the language of music without seeming unduly obscure. For Kierkegaard’s thought, this correspondence is of paramount importance; indeed, that language and music convey communicative content by being heard is an indication of how “the ear, in turn, is the most spiritually qualified sense.”⁵⁹ However, there is another way in which music and language differ dramatically. It must be examined, if we are to understand what is meant by the highest level of spiritual qualification being attributed to the ear. The aesthete notes that language, to the extent that it “is permeated with the historical,” is the most concrete of all mediums; conversely, music, as “the medium furthest removed from language,” must be considered the most abstract.⁶⁰ Concrete mediums are expressive of concrete, historical ideas, the “richness” of which grant them a high potency for repetition and the evidence for which can be seen, for example, in the epic form’s applicability to new subject matter as provided by history.⁶¹ The same can be said of abstract mediums in relation to the ideas to which they correspond, the “impoverishment” of which increases in proportion to their level of abstraction and the evidence for which is seen in the attenuated significance of the subject matter for the

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, 69.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, 68.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, 55-56.

⁶¹ “Homer certainly is a classic poet, but precisely because the idea that becomes manifest in the epic is a concrete idea and because the medium is language, it is conceivable that the section of classic works, which are all equally classic, because history continually provides new epic subject matter.” Kierkegaard, 55.

mediums of “architecture, sculpture and music.”⁶² According to our author, while the separation of a medium’s subject matter from its form, its idea from that idea’s expressive means, is not a proper way to initiate a relative evaluation of any particular work’s greatness, for most mediums of expression, such a separation between ideal content and form is, nonetheless, conceivable; for example, one can conceptualize the medium of sculpture in isolation from its ideal subject matter, the form of the human body, and vice-versa without misunderstanding either concept. Yet this is not the case for music. It differs from all of the other mediums precisely in that its absolute idea cannot be articulated outside of its performance, cannot, that is, be adequately captured in any language other than itself.

The most abstract medium has, as its proper object, the most abstract idea. At this point, the presentation of the relation between music and language becomes confounding, and necessarily so, as to the extent that any idea is in fact conceivable, it must be said that it is an ineffective representation of the abstractness of music’s proper subject matter. Thus, here we find an example of language attempting to say what it cannot via a strategic problematization of its own inability to say. Let us not shy away from the difficulties this poses for the current study. About the height of abstraction, A writes:

The most abstract idea conceivable is the sensuous in its elemental originality [*Genialitet*]. But through which medium can it be presented? Only through music. It cannot be presented in sculpture because it has a qualification of a kind of inwardness; it cannot be painted, for it cannot be caught in definite contours. In its lyricism, it is a force, a wind, impatience, passion, etc., ... it has not reached the point of words; it continually moves within immediacy. Consequently, it cannot be presented in poetry, either. The only medium that can present it is music.⁶³

⁶² Kierkegaard, 52.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, 56-57. The first sentence in this critical passage presents some telling translation difficulties. In the original, it reads: “Den abstrakteste Idee, der lader sig tænke, er den sandselige

As a medium, music is the most abstract because “it cannot express the historical in time,” which is not to say that it does not take place in time “metaphorically speaking.”⁶⁴ This point is easily lost on the reader of the 21st century who may take for granted the shift in aesthetic perspective stemming from the mechanical reproduction of sound. In the 19th century, a piece of music, strictly speaking, only maintained its existence while being performed, thus making each musical performance a unique and unrepeatable expression. Thus, while to say music stands entirely outside of the historical may be an exaggeration, it nonetheless displays a form of historical disengagement in its temporal evanescence. Hence, music’s absolute idea must match this impossibly high level of abstraction – it too must cease to exist the moment the music stops. And this is where the paradox is unearthed. The very act of positing for thought the most abstract idea it can think forces that which the idea is said to represent to cease to be. For the most abstract idea conceivable is the thought of pure sensual and experiential immediacy as it “is” prior to its being caught up in the act of abstract and reflective processes of language that are necessary for it to be known at all. The most abstract idea is therefore the thought of the

Genialitet.” Compare Hannay’s translation to that of the Hongs’: “The most abstract idea conceivable is the spirit of sensuality.” Kierkegaard, 69. The two words in question here are *Sandselighed*, which can be rendered as either ‘sensuous’ or ‘sensual;’ and *Genialitet*. About the former, Hannay justifies his choice by noting that ‘sensual’ more clearly connotes the sense of pleasure he believes to be very relevant, given the context. The difference in meaning between ‘sensual’ and ‘sensuous,’ in my opinion, is negligible, though Hannay certainly is correct to point toward there being indicated here a dimension of the sensual as the pleasurable. The choices governing the translation of *Genialitet* are much more interesting. It could be translated with the English words ‘genius,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘geniality.’ The Hongs indicate that it should not be translated as genius but do not give a reason for taking this stance. Hannay points out that using either ‘spirit’ or ‘genius’ present unavoidable ambiguities and points out that the importance of noting that the typical Danish word for spirit is “*Aand*.” “Elemental originality” seems a stretch but does get the point across. The connotation of ‘genius’ as a gifted or extraordinary individual excluded by the Hongs has considerable merit as later in this chapter *Don Giovanni* will be explicitly named as music’s absolute object – the Hongs pass over the implicit Kantian references expressed here.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, 57.

absence of all abstraction. To put it differently, the highest thought is the thought of the possibility of no thought that can only be thought as the thought of thought's own negation – if this seems annoying, one does not have an aesthetic appreciation for the beauty of the operative negative of dialectical logic – our ear is not yet developed. Again, “if you cannot get an idea of Don Giovanni by hearing him, then you never will.”⁶⁵

If we now understand how the apex of abstraction is synonymous with that of concretion, how the most abstract and reflective idea is that of the most immediate and pre-reflective, then we are well on our way to grasping the significance of a non-discursive knowing, the acquisition of which requisites reading with the speculative ear. This paradox is also the interpretative key to understanding how music and language, however seemingly distinct in that the former is the most abstract and the latter the most concrete of mediums, “must,” nonetheless, “be placed closest to each other.”⁶⁶ While sensual immediacy is the proper object of music, it is language that posits this realm of immediacy via its negation; likewise, it is linguistic abstraction as a concrete and historical medium of expression that provides the condition for the possibility of a musical masterpiece. This designation is only deserved when an artistic medium finds the content to which its form corresponds perfectly. A encapsulates this in terms of spirit, a concept which he uses to refer to self-awareness in the most elemental sense:

Not until spirit is posited is language installed in its rights, but when spirit is posited, everything that is not spirit is excluded. Yet this exclusion is a qualification of spirit, and consequently, insofar as that which is excluded is to affirm itself, it requires a medium that is qualified in relation to spirit,

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, 103.

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, 66.

and this medium is music. But a medium that is qualified in relation to spirit is essentially language; now, since music is qualified in relation to spirit, it is legitimately called a language.⁶⁷

Music is effectively classed under the heading of language only when its consideration proceeds from the standpoint of the reflexive awareness accorded to the historical subject by his operative involvement in language. Perhaps we could say that music is the language of the particular, of the singular, of whatever may remain in the wake of the mediating activity of the directive of thought toward the abstract and the general.

Although not entirely mistaken, this would not be wholly correct. Have we forgotten that music “is far more abstract than language and therefore does not express the particular but the general?” It is misleading, thus, to speak of music as the language of a particularity that language cannot speak. At the same time, let us not forget that music “expresses the general in all of its generality ... the general, not in reflective abstraction, but in the concretion of immediacy.”⁶⁸ To the extent that “it is altogether impossible to express something immediate,” or at least for the “immediate to be contained in words,” if music achieves such impossible expression, it could only be due to it not being a language at all.

The serpentine logic put on display in regard to the relation between music and language can only be deciphered at the point where one comes to see, or rather to hear, the compelling music of the paradoxical. Music both is and is not a language. Insofar as its content is the abstract as such, it is perforce the means of expressing the concretion of an immediate sensuality that must be said to exist prior to and after such concretion is

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, 66-67.

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, 101.

nullified. The necessary exclusion it undergoes at the mercy of the concept is its genetic birth as the concept of the non-conceptual in such a way that it only gives itself as resistant force to the exclusion without which it could not be at all – it is only known as that which thought cannot think. Conversely, as evidence of a sort of hitherto un-potentiaed possibility for thought, music offers knowledge in the form of experiential contact with that non-conceptual intoxicant of the aesthete – that eruption of possibility he also “knows” in the erotic encounter with the young girl. “Sensuous immediacy” is the subject matter that “has its absolute medium in music.”⁶⁹ Its expression is absolutely inseparable from the communicative effect of the music itself. What does music communicate?: “power, life, movement, continual unrest.”⁷⁰ And what embodies this communicative force more than any other?: Mozart’s master seducer, none other than the non-individual of musicality itself, Don Giovanni. Are we surprised to hear our aesthete say of himself that he is “infatuated, like a young girl, with Mozart?”⁷¹

To our aesthete, the idea of an individuated expression of sensual immediacy is not only impossible, but absurd. Mozart’s musical genius is the vehicle for conveying a “force of nature” not an individual. Don Giovanni, then, as a character in the opera is no character at all but the driving force of the musical as unending sensual desire. He writes:

Don Juan continually hovers between being idea – that is, power, life – and being an individual. But this hovering is the musical vibration. When the sea heaves and is rough, the seething waves in their turbulence form pictures resembling creatures; it seems as if it were these creatures that set

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, 71.

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, 71.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, 49.

the waves in motion ... Don Juan is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency ... about whose history one cannot learn except by listening to the noise of the waves.⁷²

... when he is conceived in music, then I do not have the particular individual, then I have a force of nature, the demonic, which no more wearies of seducing or is through with seducing than the wind with blowing a gale, the sea with rocking, or a waterfall with plunging down from the heights ... the number of the seduced can just as well be any number whatsoever.⁷³

There is a number – one thousand and three, in Spain alone. It could be four or four thousand and four; the magnitude of Giovanni's conquests is irrelevant. Once this irrelevance is fully understood, Giovanni's force can begin to become heard for no more or less than what it is, the anonymity of purely unregulated and unchecked sensual desire. In contrast, as soon as significance is accorded to any sort of quantification, he becomes individuated and, as such, his seductive prowess is lost. As an individual, he is either criminal or buffoon; as music, he is the "total infinitude of passion," "the wild craving of desire," that "nothing can resist," and "against which any attempted opposition would be ineffectual."⁷⁴ In effect, while there is a character on the stage serving as a mouthpiece for Giovanni, what he is, in essence, cannot be seen or known as an individual at all. We could say that Giovanni never attains actuality and not be too far off the mark. He is the force of becoming individual that never attains its actual form due to its never fully exhausting itself in any one of its particular manifestations. It is in this way, that Giovanni is in-between the idea and the individual – the source of all poetic idealization.

⁷² Kierkegaard, 92.

⁷³ Kierkegaard, 92-93.

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, 107.

“In his ideality,” he “cannot become visible or appear in bodily configurations and movements.”⁷⁵ The aesthete finds in the powerful impact of Mozart’s music upon the ear, understood now as a spiritually qualified sense, experiential evidence for the existence of the pre-reflective, the unformed, the wellspring of possibility overflowing itself with which he seeks to rejuvenate himself. Mozart’s music as *Don Giovanni* is thus another figuration of possibility, the non-conceptual force of animation that is both the source of aesthetic production and the transmission of which is its goal.

As personifications of the a-conceptual, as personas who entice the reader into pursuing them by involvement in the conceptual chase unfolding as the work of the text, the images of the master seducer and of the young girl form the parameters within which the act of reading becomes the exercise of the expenditure of understanding upon its limit point – aesthetic experience. The philosopher might be tempted to posit the existence of a moment of transcendence contained within the aesthetically charged experience’s ability to outstrip the intellect. Is this the transcendence that Kierkegaard’s authorship points to with its use of the concept of the eternal (*Evigheden*): “the eternal in erotic love [*Elskoven*] is that in its moment individuals first come into existence for one another”;⁷⁶ the *Ewigkeit* of Rilke, in whose presence the poet must learn how to live in order to be taught how to speak? Perhaps so, but we must keep in mind that we are referring here to conceptualizations of an experience whose experiential character expresses its inseparability from the immanence of its occurrence. The young girl and Don Giovanni are embodiments of one and the same force, of what Kierkegaard terms the “sensuous

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard, 106.

⁷⁶ Kierkegaard, 381.

immediate.” As a means of elucidation, I suggest we turn our attention momentarily to §49 of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, “On the Powers of the Mind Which Constitute Genius.”⁷⁷ The artistic genius, producer of *schönes Kunst*, creates images of the beautiful. The inspiration, animation of spirit, involved in the images’ production, is capable of moving the spirit (*Geist*) of its viewer. Kant states it thus, “*Spirit* in an aesthetic sense is the animating principle (*belebende Prinzip*) in the mind,” and continues a few lines later:

I maintain that this principle is nothing but the ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas*; and by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation (*Vorstellung*) of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] *concept* (*Begriff*), can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.⁷⁸

If we consider “the young girl” and “the seducer” to be productions of Kierkegaard’s artistic and spirited nature, they seem to fulfill these requirements adequately of Kant’s aesthetic idea. Further, they might be effectively understood as the images around which the text’s animation revolves, as exhibitions of both the work’s spirited production and the movement of spirit, the inspiration, it effectuates in its reader.

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 181-188. As this project progresses it will become evident that one of its goals will be an explication of how Kierkegaard and Adorno’s thought attempt to enact an aesthetic form of communication, a transference of a non-discursive, a-conceptual form of knowledge; moreover, it will also become apparent that this theme is born out of Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgments. For now, let it suffice to say that in the Kantian framework an aesthetic judgment is called such “precisely because the basis determining it is not concept but the feeling (of inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers insofar as it can only be sensed.” Kant, 75.

⁷⁸ Kant, 181-182.

iii: Aesthetic Pedagogy

He who could not seduce men cannot save them either. This is the qualification of reflection (Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*).⁷⁹

... his [Kierkegaard's] compromising books are pseudonymous and pseudonymous to the core. They can, in their totality and in spite of their contents just as well be understood as the misleading letters of the seducer, written behind clouds (Franz Kafka, "Letter to Brod").⁸⁰

"I am a pseudonym."⁸¹ Taken from the reflective writings of Kierkegaard's journal, these words would seem to confirm the perspicacity of Kafka's observation. The meaning of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works is inseparable from the form of that meaning's expression. Let us take the notion of an existential truth and tentatively define it as a type of truth the efficacy of which is transformative of one's life perspective and with that is productive of change in one's life in one way or another. This is admittedly a reductive definition. Moreover, there may be cause to move altogether away from a purely existential approach to understanding Kierkegaard's texts.⁸² Nonetheless, it is an acknowledged and useful entry point into a discussion that takes up for consideration the purpose at work in Kierkegaard's befuddling style. If we acknowledge that however we may choose to speak about it, the truth conveyed in the pseudonymous texts is subjective

⁷⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers Vol. 3*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 717.

⁸⁰ Franz Kafka, "Letter to Brod," *Briefe 1901-1924*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), 238.

⁸¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papier*, X2 A 89, as translated and quoted by Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 28.

⁸² This dissertation initiates such a move away from the merely existential reading of Kierkegaard but does not seek to invalidate such a reading. It does seek to show how the traditional existential reading has allowed for a solidification of approach toward Kierkegaard that is counterproductive to the further development of our understanding of the complex and nuanced thought of this philosopher.

in that peculiarly Kierkegaardian sense of prompting “an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness,”⁸³ then it must be asked whether and to what degree pseudonymity is an essential, necessary condition for the transference of the content of the text’s meaning. The status accorded to the pseudonym points out the importance of the thematic relationship of identity and freedom, on the one hand, and language as the means of that freedom’s expression, on the other. As pseudonym, the author Kierkegaard is not other than the activity of identity’s dissimulation, a skill the perfection of which is bestowed by our author upon the poetic persona of Johannes, the purported author of the “Seducer’s Diary.” This being the case, a close examination of his diary may provide us with hitherto unexplored insight into Kierkegaard’s aesthetic project and its communicative mechanisms of indirection.

This section opens this possibility. It seeks indirectly to expose Kierkegaard as the seducer, the aesthetic philosopher, whose carefully constructed conniving aims to set into motion within the reader a heightened awareness of the experience of possibility, an experience, as has been demonstrated, that is for the aesthete, both source and goal. This exposition will be indirect insofar as it is Johannes the seducer, not Kierkegaard the author, who will be scrutinized; likewise, it is the change undergone by Cordelia, the young girl who falls victim to his seduction, not the reader herself, that will be investigated. While Johannes and Cordelia are *prima facie* objects of inquiry, the potential parallel between the pairs, seducer/seduced and author/reader, should be kept in mind. It is my contention that the “Seducer’s Diary” provides us with the occasion for an investigation the richness of which is unmatched by any other part of Kierkegaard’s

⁸³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974), 182.

corpus. Might there be something inherently instructive contained within the experience of succumbing to the powers of seduction? Many of Johannes' statements indicate that he believes his trickery to be tantamount to a methodical pedagogy; yet, identifying precisely what he believes to be teaching Cordelia is a challenge. It may not be an entirely insurmountable one, at least if we suspend any expectation of articulating the what of his teaching in distinction from the how of his method. If the school of the seducer is that of possibility, at this point, we should not be astonished to learn that the goal of his lesson plan is inexpressible and inconceivable apart from the means of the lesson's delivery. His is an aesthetic pedagogy, after all.

An even broader issue, underlying the present focus of this inquiry, is that of the general relationship between seduction and education. The complexity of the relation is expressed etymologically. The word "educate" and the word "seduce" share a common root in the Latin verb *ducere*, the meaning of which is simply "to lead." Thus, the difference in meaning lies only within their respective prefixes: namely, the abbreviated *ex-* in *educere* and the *se-* of *seducere*, the former meaning "out" and the latter "away." Etymologically speaking, the distinction between the root idea behind the concept of education and that of seduction seems conspicuously slight. To educate would mean to lead someone out of something, conceivably out of ignorance or innocence, while to seduce would be to lead someone away from something, again, perhaps away from innocence or ignorance. This suggests a conceptual and practical intimacy between the two activities belied by the strict distinction typically drawn between the sensual and the intellectual dimensions of human experience. While such a revelation is not likely to sit well with the overseers of what passes for the education of the youth today, that the

ambiguity exposed here is not arbitrary or insignificant is supported by the figure of Socrates. Arguably the greatest seducer and/or corrupter of the youth to have ever lived, he maintains, at the same time, his position of rank among the most influential educators of humanity. No doubt, Socratic *maieutics* is, in part, the inspiration for Kierkegaard's own project as a whole and specifically for the character of Johannes in *Either/Or*. Perhaps, his portrait of the seductive aesthetic realm is motivated by the understanding that one's potential to be effectively educated very well may be in direct proportion to one's susceptibility to seduction. Before speculation can proceed effectively in regard to such questions, the identification of the seducer with the educator must be established. Hopefully, the following explication of the diary to this effect will serve to inaugurate the discussion of these rather large questions in an effective manner.

Johannes the seducer is not easy to identify. This is due, in part, to the strategic resistance he employs against actuality, the solidification of possibility by means of its exhaustion in the actual. He is an image and enlists much effort in retaining the aesthetic powers contained therein. In his words: "Everything is image [*Alte er Billede*]; I myself am a myth about myself ... who I am is irrelevant; only the eternal remains, the power of erotic love, its longing, its bliss."⁸⁴ This power to effectuate a transformation of self-understanding has been suggested to be the power of seduction itself. We are already familiar with the manifestation of such a power in the musical figuration of *Don Giovanni*. The first step in our attempt to identify Johannes must be in outlining the distinction drawn between his activity and that of the seductive force accorded to *Giovanni*. In the opera, the effectiveness of *Giovanni's* erotic exploits rests within his

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, 444. I have modified the translation somewhat; most notably, I translate *Billede* as "image," rather than "metaphor," as the Hongs have inexplicably done.

capacity for idealization, that is, his ability to generate an experience of an ideal within the females upon whom he preys. The aesthete contends that this power by means of which he seduces is:

the energy of desire, the energy of sensuous desire. He desires total femininity in every woman, and therein lies the sensuous, idealizing force with which he simultaneously enhances and overcomes his prey.

Note the element of enhancement and the emphasis it receives here. For *Don Giovanni*,

A continues:

... all the finite differences vanish for him in comparison with the main point: to be a woman. The old ones he rejuvenates into the beautiful middle age of womanhood; the child he almost matures in an instant; everything that is woman is his prey ... above all else, he idealizes.⁸⁵

As a consequence of the mysterious dynamism he welds over the feminine, each seduced female is pulled, so to speak, out of her everyday way of understanding herself into an experience of her own ideal – under the sway of his power, the plain girl feels herself sophisticated, the immature one finds a longed for maturity, the older one is suddenly young again. The power of *Don Giovanni's* form of seduction facilitates an experience for the girl of being who she is not but ultimately desires to be, only in the end to find herself abandoned upon the falsity of said ideal.

It is important to recall that *Giovanni* is not an individual. He is nothing other than the force of idealization itself, which is another way of saying that he is the unreflected expression of sensuous desire, as has been said, that he is no one or no thing at all. Consequently, to label *Giovanni* a seducer is to mislead. It is “the power of the sensuous itself that deceives the seduced;”⁸⁶ and this, lest we forget, “cannot be expressed

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, 100.

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, 99.

in words; only music can give us a notion of it; for reflection and thought it is inexpressible.”⁸⁷ As music, *Giovanni* is not a speaking and cajoling individual who seduces but seduction as such. A seducer would be a self-reflective individual who harnesses the unspeakable force *Giovanni* embodies as music with the reflective and expressive power of language; one who poetically reflects and directs sensuous desire to the point that reflection becomes an art-form. Contrasting such a character with the non-reflective, “extrinsic” force of *Giovanni*, the author offers an unequivocal foreshadowing of Johannes’ type of “intrinsic” seduction here:

So the latter *Don Juan* is not presented as possessing his object with one single blow – he is not the immediately qualified seducer; his is the reflective seducer ... How many he has seduced is of no importance here; what occupies us is the artistry, the meticulousness, the profound cunning with which he seduces ... the musical *Don Juan* enjoys the satisfaction; the reflective *Don Juan* enjoys the deception.⁸⁸

Notwithstanding, for the moment, the possibility that the author of this essay has not fully grasped the nuanced pleasures of seduction’s reflected form, he does make a point that Johannes will later use to distinguish his particular form of art from common seduction. Namely, that the reflective seducer’s goal is entirely other than the satisfaction of desire, be it sexual or otherwise, through simple possession of desire’s object. Desire’s consummation ceases to serve as an end for the activity of life through desire’s reflective appropriation of itself – commensurate with the elongating of the experiential disruption of possibility into experience, the skill of the aesthete, the poet philosopher. If it is correct to hold idealization as a constitutive component of seduction, then we would expect to find the reflective seducer’s sophistication of desire’s force evidenced by the

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, 101.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, 99-101.

ability to play self-consciously a constructive role in the shaping of the ideal. While *Don Giovanni's* absolute desire is dependent upon the ideals his victims already possess and wants nothing other than immediate satisfaction, the desire of the reflective seducer becomes the generative motor for the participatory transfiguration of experience into the concretion of ideality's expression. The participatory role is granted by the reflective distancing of language.

The aesthete understands that unreflective desire wishes for death, to simply cease to be, when it takes nothing other than its own fulfillment as its end. The erotic dimension of experience from which his reflection cultivates and within which the actions dwell is radically indeterminate. That it is dangerous to dwell within a contextual space wherein the difference between *eros* and *thanatos* is at times indistinguishable he knows. Evoking an image of insects dying in the moment of fertilization, he states: "So it is with all joy; life's highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death."⁸⁹ The linguistic cultivation of desire no longer seeks desire's cessation but its expression as testament to the ideal of beauty the aesthete experiences through the object of his desire. Our aesthete is not one to brood too long over death, however it may cast a haunting shadow over this desire. That the purported writer of the *Seducer's Diary*, Johannes, the paragon of our reflective seducer, is devoted to the ideal this way is stated forthrightly, albeit with a hint of the ironic: "What is glorious and divine about aesthetics

⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, 20. This is actually quite an unusually direct statement from Kierkegaard in regard to the seemingly atypical Kierkegaardian theme of the erotic intertwining of sex and death. It is my contention that Kierkegaard's sophisticated comprehension of the relation between violence and desire is belied by the subtlety of its expression. As a result, or perhaps simply as an arbitrary matter of "taste," there has been no direct scholarly pursuit in this direction. It will not become the focus in this inquiry either. Perhaps, to begin such an inquiry, it would be beneficial to turn to *The Sickness Unto Death*. There, overcoming our evasions to be the particularized concretion of subjectivity we are is, in one sense, said to be equal to overcoming the mechanisms of our own self-hatred and desire for death – the phenomenon of despair.

is that it is associated only with the beautiful; essentially it deals only with *belles lettres* and the fair sex.”⁹⁰ And then in a decisive passage for our evolving characterization of the aesthetic, he writes:

... my pact with the aesthetic ... it is that which makes me strong – that I continually have the idea on my side. It is a secret like Samson’s hair, one that no Delilah can wrest from me. Plainly and simply to deceive a girl, for that I certainly would not have the stamina; but the fact that the idea is present in motion, that I am acting in its service – this gives me the rigorousness toward myself⁹¹

This passage alone suffices to render compelling the contention that there is much more to Johannes’ game than the satisfaction of possessive desire *via* a methodical trickery that deceives in order to conquer, even if its pleasure stems from the artistry of the deception as such. Our seducer appears to be interested in something beyond seduction.

Johannes even directly includes himself under the category of “eroticist,” specifically distinguishing himself from “vulgar seducers”⁹² in typological terms of desire, indicating that, insofar as his pleasure involves possession, it is only in the passive mode of accepting a gift. “... I desire nothing that in the strictest sense is not freedom’s gift.”⁹³ Otherwise one succumbs to the ordinary, the un-interesting, the less than poetic forms of deception that have as their only goal that the girl “give it up,” the sooner the better, pleasure being taken in a quantified series of successful sexual conquests.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, 428.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, 437.

⁹² It is worth noting, that the title of this piece of writing is given to it by Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor of the collected papers comprising the book and not by the purported author of the diary itself. No doubt this plays into the dramatic tension the text establishes between the inner and the outer – in this case, between the covert seduction of Cordelia that happens overtly on the pages of the diary and the ostensible means of that seduction the diary presents to the reader only to problematize with the suggestion that the real means have remained covert by claiming to not be a seducer.

⁹³ Kierkegaard, 368.

Johannes wonders what those who profess such enjoyment could possibly be gaining, as he continues:

He who does not know how to encircle a girl such that she loses sight of everything he does not want her to see, he who does not know how to poetize himself into a girl so that it is from her that everything proceeds as he wants ... such a person is and remains a bungler, a seducer, which I can by no means be called. **I am an aesthete, an eroticist, who has grasped the point and nature of love**, who believes in love and knows it from the ground up.⁹⁴

The next sentence subjects this passage's sincerity to the mocking qualification of irony; " ... no lover affair should last for more than a half year at most and that any relationship is over as soon as one has enjoyed the ultimate." As if mocking, in turn, any lack of sincerity conveyed by such indifference, Johannes names his "highest enjoyment imaginable." It is " ... to be loved, loved more than anything else in the world."⁹⁵

Caution should be observed so as not too quickly to dress up Johannes in the suit of sentimental romanticism, despite the fact that this is a suit he sometimes indeed adorns, despite the fact that it is not a good fit. Nonetheless, we would be remiss to pass over the suggestive character of these passages wherein Johannes views himself as much more than a seducer. Directly illuminating his position's intricacies, the subtle expression of which in the diary *eo ipso* insures that they display an element of that secrecy "erotic love loves,"⁹⁶ indirectly perhaps, Kierkegaard's authorial complicity with this keeping of secrets establishes the circuit of imaginative recognition between author and reader that

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard, 368.

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard, 368.

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard, 388.

Kierkegaard's texts always hold out as the possibility of their finding an individual by whom to be read.

Any significant difference between the appellations "seducer" and "eroticist" has apparently escaped the notice of most Kierkegaard scholars.⁹⁷ One notable exception exists within Sylvia Walsh's book length study *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*.⁹⁸ There the meaning of Johannes' professed eroticism is taken seriously and subjected to an astute textual analysis. Walsh confirms that the difference between the vulgarity of common seduction and the sublimity of eroticism lies within the relationship assumed to the young girl's relative state of freedom. The eroticist makes no

⁹⁷ In the treatment the diary receives from the scholarship, the most comprehensive and exclusive handling to be found is Bradley Dewey's article, "Seven Seducers: A Typology of Interpretations of the Aesthetic Stage in Kierkegaard's "The Seducer's Diary," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or I*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 159-200. I refer the reader there for a very helpful overview of popular ways of approaching the difficult task of situating the diary within its place in the overall schema of Kierkegaard's thought. Perhaps this is what each of the potential designations of Johannes he explores (sensualist, immoralist, sinner, cog, child, artist, cad) share in common: they all proceed from an assumed developmental, systematic narrative of cohesiveness over Kierkegaard's thought. What the scholarship of yet has not struggled with adequately is not just that Kierkegaard's writings struggle to resist any such systematic shaping, additionally, they have not recognized how the writings demand the reader to provide them with just such an interpretative structure but in the awareness of the impossibility of doing so with any faithfulness to the text. Could this be the cause behind Johannes' self-designation as "eroticist" not being included among the list of applicable terms in an article that establishes itself as offering the most comprehensive, if not authoritative, treatment of Johannes to date? Could it be that the "eroticist" is the signification pointing toward an aspect of Kierkegaard's treatment of the aesthetic that is not so easily dismissed in the individual's development toward the ethical and religious?

⁹⁸ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 93. Walsh rightly find it "puzzling [that Johannes'] own self-characterization as an eroticist has virtually been overlooked as a principal category of interpretation." After pointing out how Dewey's article (*Cf.* ftnt. 104) serves as the most glaring example of this widespread omission, she informs us of the only other exceptions to be found. John Vignaux Smyth, she notes, "associates Johannes with an erotic aesthetics that has its conception in the eros and irony of Socrates," only to pass over "elucidating the eroticism of Johannes" with an analysis of the larger role irony plays in Kierkegaard's writings. She credits Smyth with skillfully bringing out "the indeterminacy of the erotic, which is identified with the feminine and with truth and beauty, which the ironist playfully attempts to master." Another exception is to be found in the work of Stephen Dunning, although to the extent that "he interprets Johannes fundamentally as a deceiver," he fails to develop a reading of Johannes that does justice to his eroticism. Knud Hansen, she tells us, "consistently interprets Johannes as an eroticist" and suggests "it is not sensuality but erotic ecstasy that Johannes seeks in relation to women, who function merely as external incitements to the awakening and culmination of ecstasy in him." John Vignaux Smyth, *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, and Barthes* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986); Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Knud Hansen, *Søren Kierkegaard: Ideens Digter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1954).

false promises. The vulgar seducer willingly uses any means necessary to fulfill his unscrupulous desire, including less than noble falsehoods intent on ensnaring the victim's freedom. The eroticist does not set traps in this manner; rather, his deceptive tactics are performed for the sake of the development of the girl's freedom – in short, he wishes for her, in full awareness of the significance of her actions, to give herself over fully and freely to her own desire. This is her gift of freedom bestowed upon and fulfilling the desire of the eroticist. Johannes states it like so:

She herself must be developed within herself; she must feel the resilience of her soul ... She must owe me nothing, for she must be free. Only in freedom is there love; only in freedom are there diversion and everlasting amusement. Although I am making arrangements so that she will sink into my arms as if by a necessity of nature and am striving to make her gravitate toward me, the point nevertheless is that she should not fall like a heavy body but as a mind should gravitate toward mind ... Between us two, only freedom's own game will prevail.⁹⁹

As to the specific means the eroticist employs in “artfully developing a girl within herself,” Walsh observes that this end apparently justifies quite a range of technique: “deception, dissimulation, psychological conflict, irony, erotic stimulation;” in short, “anything that will aid her development.”¹⁰⁰ In this way, Johannes' calculated seduction of the “lovely, lively, passionate, innocent, imaginative, proud” young girl Cordelia Wahl is the equivalent of her “education in the art of erotic love.”¹⁰¹ We will return to this theme of Cordelia's development in detail shortly, but before we do so, let us take another close look at our eroticist and his complicated motivations.

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 360-361.

¹⁰⁰ Walsh, *Living Poetically*, 94.

¹⁰¹ Walsh, 94.

While Walsh's treatment of "The Seducer's Diary" stands out and is commendable in the recognition she grants aspects of the text that reveal dimensions of reflective seduction little explored, in the end, she misunderstands the driving force behind Johannes' escapades. As a result, the relation between freedom, of a type the development of which the eroticist needs to witness in the young girl, and the concept of possibility, the experiential contact with which he needs as the animating motor of his own rejuvenation, goes unrecognized. That the connection between the two is an intimate one and that an understanding of any distinctions between the life-practices of the eroticist and the seducer is incumbent upon an exploration of this intimacy is evident. While Walsh is correct to state: "unlike the musical Don Juan, this seducer is much more interested in the art of seduction;" indeed Johannes' reified craft, "his method of conquering," is a methodically developed art-form, she misses the mark by deducing from this that he is not so interested "in the act of seduction, the experience itself."¹⁰² This ignores much of what Johannes has to say about his own enjoyment; moreover, such a position stamps the passages regarding the possibility of a reflective form of seduction found in the earlier chapter on Mozart's opera with an interpretative authority certainly at odds with Kierkegaard's undermining of his own. Naturally, positing that the eroticist's enjoyment stems not at all from the reflective development of his deceptive abilities would naively commit the same error of interpretation. Any enjoyment, however, of the formal structure of seduction is not the primary motivation behind the undertaking of seduction as an art-form of life, at least, not for one who is not merely a seducer. Impossible as it may be unambiguously to state which poetic persona is responsible for

¹⁰² Walsh, 92.

saying of Johannes that “his life has been an attempt to accomplish the task of living poetically,”¹⁰³ these words encapsulate well the often overlooked truth that Johannes, as the paradigmatic representation of an aesthete, seeks a particular experience of life, a concrete moment of contact with ideality – seeks to transform life into a showing of the creative force engendered and unleashed by the aesthete’s encounters with the beautiful.

However reflection doubles back upon itself to infuse life with the transfiguration of ideality, disregarding the subsequent capacity for an aesthetic enjoyment tied to the double-reflection of the recollection of an aesthetic experience in the production of a works of art like the literary work that is the diary, the eroticist must have valid experiential contact with a muse, a source of inspiration that fascinates his imaginative desire and motivates the prolongation of its effectual power of creation it undergoes in the enjoyment of his reflection. This contact is key to the perpetuation of his enjoyment at all levels of reflection. It might be thought as a juncture point or irruption of possibility into the eroticist’s experiences as a sustaining of his poetic nature. Of this nature now tinged with the poetic, of Johannes, we read that whether or not “it is not abundant enough” or “not deficient enough,” the result is the inability to separate “poetry and actuality from each other;”¹⁰⁴ in other words, Johannes’ own, “I am seeking

¹⁰³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 304. This description is taken from the prefatory remarks that precede the beginning of the diary proper. Supposedly, the copy of the diary that fell into *Eremita*’s hands among the papers he discovered by accident in his writing desk was itself discovered in a writing desk by an acquaintance of the diary’s author, who claims to have then proceeded “to make an accurate clean copy of the hurried transcript I was able to obtain at the time only in the greatest haste and with great uneasiness” Kierkegaard, 303. This extreme example of Kierkegaard’s characteristic distancing of his written words from their authoring serves to elucidate the play at work behind his project. The diary opens: “Hide from myself, I cannot,” Kierkegaard, 303. He might have added a statement to the effect that in attempting to do so, he no doubt is succeeding at hiding from the reader.

¹⁰⁴ Kierkegaard, 305.

immediacy ... the eternal in erotic love”¹⁰⁵ as the experienced actuality of possibility of “individuals first com[ing] into existence for each other.” His enjoyment should not be mistaken as a self-aggrandizing, reflective pride taken in the exquisite expertise he displays with his creative response to this moment – at least not entirely. He enjoys the girl pre-reflectively, enjoys the actual impact her musical image has on him in its immediacy, not just as mirrored reflectively in the inherent aesthetic beauty of his artistry of seduction. It is clear, then, that the source of the eroticist’s motion remains beyond the effective range of his abilities to poetize existence – that is to say, his muses must choose him not his choices them.¹⁰⁶

Sensually experiencing the effects of Cordelia’s powerful image of ideality is Johannes’s fundamental aim. Achievement equates to an intensification of experience now permeated by the aesthetic, even overwhelmingly so. As image, the ideality of erotic love, of beauty, attests to, attempts to express evidence for, its possible existence as non-image, as image’s source in the creative productivity of erotic desire. The young girl, accordingly, is both more and less than the image of ideality she bears. Her image imposes itself as an overwhelming question of possibility the meaning of which outstretches the boundaries of its perceptual outline. Analogously to the pre-personal, impersonal, non-identical force whose musical expression is *Don Giovanni’s* desire, less

¹⁰⁵ Kierkegaard, 381.

¹⁰⁶ That Johannes experiences it thus despite the awareness he uses to distance himself ironically from its effects and, no doubt, in the end bolster his, from one perspective, inexplicable and unjustifiable cruelty, is expressed by these words of Georges Bataille, whose role in the early French translations of Kierkegaard suggest a deep Kierkegaardian vein within his thought even if it, as of yet, has not been traced: “The passion of the *self*, love burning within it, seeks an object. The *self* is only liberated *outside of itself*. I can know that I have created the object of my passion, that it does not exist on its own accord: it is no less there.” Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 73.

than herself, then, in that the ineffable fragility of her beauty is the resilient silence against which the language of desire rebounds – she as image, like music or magic, entirely ceases to be, when the performance stops. In his journal, Kierkegaard observes: “Silent, but not every young girl appears silent because she keeps silent ... and yet [silence] is the first, the deepest quality ... her deeper nature.”¹⁰⁷ To affirm the intoxicating effects of the eliciting force of possibility as unapologetic desire effectuates a qualitative shift disavowing comprehensibility by amplifying the aesthetic effects of silence. In the following passage from the diary, Johannes describes the “transfiguring ceremoniousness” that silently spreads over the scene of Cordelia seated together with him very early in the engagement. Her blush:

... a soft morning light. She is silent; nothing breaks in upon the stillness ... what does this blush signify? Is it love, is it longing, hope, fear ... By no means. She wonders, she really wonders ... she is amazed ... not at herself but within herself. She is being transformed within herself. This moment craves stillness; therefore no reflection is to disturb it, no noise of passion is to disrupt it. It is as if I were not present, and yet it is my very presence that is the condition for this contemplative wonder of hers. **My being is in harmony with hers. In a state such as this, a girl is adored and worshipped, just as some deities are, by silence.**¹⁰⁸

The eroticist lives to seek out and bear witness to this the event of the poetic. In this way, he becomes the conduit by means of which experience receives its aesthetic intensification. Its fuel drawn from the rare moment wherein Johannes stands caught by the reflection of Cordelia’s image, but in such a way that the resulting reflective self-awareness of himself as enraptured before her leaves the immediacy of the moment, in all of its poetic wonder, intact. His reflective awareness of desire is not disruptive of the experiential genesis of this desire in the non-reflective. Here we have the contact point

¹⁰⁷ Kierkegaard, 571.

¹⁰⁸ Kierkegaard, 379.

with possibility that the aesthete seeks. He attempts to submit this invisible connective harmony to the communicative power of language, recognizing that success in doing so is contingent upon his ability to make his words sing, to convey the possibility beyond the capacity to say but is expressed, nonetheless, within the act of its saying as tonality. The young girl is now an experiential demarcation of the sacred – evidence, as it were, for the existence of God. The confirmation of truth as passionate response to objective uncertainty is glimpsed in the beloved’s eyes, if even only for a moment, possesses enough power to shatter the grip the reflective, the universal, the abstract hold over experience. The intertwining of poetry and philosophy is brought to light in this moment wherein knowledge ceases to function and passion is born in wonder before the object of desire.

Johannes is the erotic philosopher seeking a direct experiential knowing via experiencing possibility sensually. He is here the student of the erotic and, in this sense, the girl as the occasion for the activity of his coming to know himself becomes, in effect, his instructor: “a young girl is a born teacher;” “it is all over for a man only when he has grown so old that he can learn nothing from a young girl;”¹⁰⁹ “[I] always approach a young girl with a certain anxiety; my heart pounds, for I sense the eternal power that is in her nature.”¹¹⁰ While it is the concrete experience of being stirred to motion by a perceived ideality of possibility within the world he is after, the image of the young girl striking him in this way as the occasion for the source of the motion of the world, this is not all that he seeks. Cordelia’s development is his honest concern. Recall that, for Johannes, pleasure in being loved is absent without love being given out of that perfect

¹⁰⁹ Kierkegaard, 387.

¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard, 435.

harmonic state of correspondence between desire and freedom – she must be free and know it for her love to furnish the gift of rejuvenation. If she is inspiration sustaining wonder and desire before the fecundity of possibility, the ideality of her image, he is the occasion of her coming to know herself as an expression of the force behind the impossible ideality of her own desire, as an awareness of her freedom to be erotic.

Furthermore, Johannes is not alone in being anxious. Kierkegaard states in his journal: “The Seducer’s secret is simply that he knows that woman is anxious.”¹¹¹ The anxiety of erotic desire and that of a freedom facing itself in its own-most possibility are, if not equivalents in the full sense of the word, at least, intertwined to such an extent that, at times, the choices they pose, the questions they ask, are, for Kierkegaard, indistinguishable. If the young girl’s power resides in her being anxious, no doubt, it is of the same type that the aesthete accords to the musical *Don Giovanni*. Anxiety, he claims, “is Don Giovanni’s life ... is in him ... is his energy;” additionally, “it is not a subjectively reflected anxiety; it is a substantial anxiety;” a substantial anxiety being “the full force of the sensuous ... born in anxiety.”¹¹² A young girl lacks in reflexive awareness of her own power, but not in the ability to be the full expression of this that she is; as we will see, in becoming aware of the aesthetic, in being seduced into awareness of her freedom, she becomes aware of her own ideality reflectively, that is, only in the mode of its being now lost. It appears she is anxiety both before and after the ordeal of her seduction – before as the unreflective force of sensuality, after as that

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard, 589.

¹¹² Kierkegaard, 129.

force's reflection upon itself in an impossible ideality.¹¹³ Before turning our attention to the Cordelia's transformation, let us ask if this realization facilitates understanding Johannes' meaning when he writes, in regard to Cordelia that insofar as he "may have any educative influence on her, it is by teaching her again and again what I have learned from her."¹¹⁴

Besides a broken heart, a consideration of what she may get out of it this experience initiates our turn toward the examination of Johannes' method of seduction – and here we arrive at the proper topic of this section from whence it takes its title, "aesthetic pedagogy." Taken from the prefatory remarks to Johannes' diary, a document of which the authorship, lest we forget, even the aesthete disavows, is the following description of Cordelia's state after having been Johannes' victim:

It is oppressive for her that he has deceived her, but still more oppressive for her, one is almost tempted to say, that he has awakened multiple-tongued reflection, that he has so developed her esthetically that she no longer listens humbly to one voice but is able to hear the many voices at the same time. Then recollection awakens in her soul, and she forgets blame and guilt; she recollects the beautiful moments, and she is dazed in an unusual exaltation.¹¹⁵

Here, before we have entered the interior of Johannes' reflections, we have what is to come portrayed in the form of a development of her capacities, as an expansion of her perspective from single to multiple, and as an awakening in her soul to the power of recollection. To the extent that this knowledge is characterized as oppressive, she is in a

¹¹³ A detailed explication of the concept of anxiety is necessary even to begin to do justice to its overall importance in Kierkegaard's thought. Such work is beyond the current scope of investigation – but only in the mode of deferment. The third chapter of this dissertation is devoted to this task. For now, let it suffice to say that the eroticist's point of contact with actuality, his desire and his longing "for the ideal in his words and thoughts," is to some degree experienced as angst; as a consequence, his experience is a question of freedom. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 334.

¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 327.

¹¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 309.

state of despair [how is this different than anxiety]; at the same time, bestowed upon her is an apparent newfound capacity for experiencing joy before the beautiful. Her development is aesthetic. This does not, however, preclude it from being intellectual; on the contrary, there will be reason to conclude that a major lesson of Kierkegaard's aesthetic is that differences assumed between the aesthetic and the intellectual, the sensual and the abstract, and by extension, desire and reason, are, only to the extent that they provide structure to the artifice of thought. At any rate, it can be said without equivocation that Cordelia possesses a type of knowledge she did not have before her ordeal with Johannes, even if this knowledge itself remains equivocal – it may even be the case that this knowing is the ability to equivocate infinitely.

Or is Cordelia's state better understood as the ability to speculate? In a parodying of Hegelian thought found in the fragmented *Diapsalmata* of the aesthete, we read:

It [philosophy] begins, in fact, with nothing and therefore can always begin. But it is always difficult for philosophy and philosophers to stop. This difficulty, too, I have avoided, for if anyone thinks that I, in stopping now, actually stop, he demonstrates that he does not have speculative comprehension.¹¹⁶

The “speculative comprehension” necessary for the comprehension of philosophy is comparable to Cordelia's state of “multi-tongued reflection.” Thus compounding their meanings is illuminative. Knowledge of the aesthetic, aesthetic knowing, can be understood as a type of reflective comprehension born out of an apprehension of the ideal of possibility. Cordelia, in having come into contact with the ideality of eros, has, as a result, become a reflective human being. However, her newfound reflective ability does

¹¹⁶ Kierkegaard, 39.

not equate with a capacity to understand what she has undergone with clarity.¹¹⁷ Her knowledge of the aesthetic recollects experience in such a way that all possible competing accounts of that experience are allowed equal voice and become subjected to the interior movement of speculation wherein no one possible account can be given final credibility. From the standpoint of the education of any particular individual, it might be said that the acquisition of this knowledge is synonymous with one's coming to see her own viewpoint as only one possibility amongst many; in other words, it would be a process of pulling out the roots of an individual's specific world-view, everything instilled through, let's say, the influence of culture and family, and bringing the individual into an awareness of his or her own freedom in the form of a reflective speculation upon the inexhaustible yet, until now, unconsidered possibilities. This reflective capacity provides no ground for choosing any one possible interpretation of experience over any other – from a purely aesthetic viewpoint, all could be equally interesting.

If knowledge of the aesthetic is indeed equivalent to a realization of the relative status of one's particularized viewpoint, we have no need to doubt that this process of destabilization is a necessary and important component in the process that is the education of an individual – before she can learn, she must come to an understanding of her own ignorance, to an awareness, that is, of the limitations inherent within the specificity of her individual point of view. We see evidence that Cordelia is coming into such an awareness of the thoughtlessness of her own convictions when she begins to

¹¹⁷ Indeed, she cannot say with any certainty whether or not she has been seduced at all. There are hints of this dilemma scattered throughout the book, for example: "That a deception is actually a deception is often very difficult to determine clearly, and yet everything depends upon that. As long as this debatable, the sorrow will find no repose but must continue to ramble back and forth in reflection." Kierkegaard, 172.

express mindfulness of the poverty of the culturally defined practices surrounding her engagement to Johannes, in comparison at least to the grandeur of idealized love. As it is for Johannes, such an ideal is the infinite character of possibility harbored by the sensual in its immediacy, although what they each receive from contact with the ideal differs greatly. The motion of her seduction is the gradual awakening of her own ideality – if she is for Johannes experiential contact with the actuality of possibility, for herself, she is the becoming aware of herself as the source of her own seduction. Hence, the confounding, ambivalent relation she assumes retrospectively in relation to the whole experience. When Johannes writes that “she must discover the infinite, must experience that this is what lies closest to a person,” he is saying that she must come to experience the infinitude of passion in such a way that she becomes aware that all of the social restrictions placed on desire, all of its definitions as solidified in the cultural practice of marriage, are for love in the infinite sense, a death sentence.

Paramount among the principles governing Johannes’ method of seduction is that of the interesting. The interesting is preserved “precisely through the contradiction between the outward appearance and the inward life.”¹¹⁸ The seduction of Cordelia turns on keeping things interesting and one keeps things interesting, both for others and oneself, by drawing attention to the potential discrepancy between the inner and outer, a disparity whose partiality toward musical expression *Victor Eremita* gives as justification for his own preference for the sense of hearing, a discrepancy which, in the form of a question, is expressed in the opening sentence of the book. It seems the interesting

¹¹⁸ Kierkegaard, 391.

addresses itself to the ear. Within a purported letter to the aesthete, apparently a friend by more than their shared acquaintance with Johannes, Cordelia states:

I have always loved music; he was a matchless instrument, always sensitive; he had a range such as no other instrument has. He was the quintessence of all feeling and moods, no thought was too sublime for him, none too desperate. He could roar like an autumn storm; he could whisper inaudibly ... With an indescribable but cryptic, blissful, unnameable anxiety, I listened to this music I myself had evoked and yet did not evoke; always there was harmony, always I was enraptured by him.¹¹⁹

Imaginative dissimulation is the tonality heard throughout the implementation of his multi-faceted, indirect methodology. From the contrived accidental aura of his initial encounters with Cordelia on the street, whereby his aim is to “merely skirt the periphery of her existence,”¹²⁰ but in such a way that he gradually “insinuates [his self] into her thoughts,”¹²¹ through the love letters, the concentrated intensity of expression of which serve in there “being developed within her a mental concupiscence;”¹²² to the detail accorded to the arrangement of their post-engagement tryst, wherein he is to enjoy his final reward for her development,¹²³ the means of the communication with Cordelia, their relationship, as it were, transpires via *innuendo*, the suggestiveness of ambivalence, and the entrancement of secrecy, all of which transform Cordelia’s experience with the “singular magic”¹²⁴ of the imaginative into a poetic idealization of herself. The vibratory tension between the actual and the possible, the outer and the inner, the immediate and

¹¹⁹ Kierkegaard, 310.

¹²⁰ Kierkegaard, 341.

¹²¹ Kierkegaard, 322.

¹²² Kierkegaard, 403.

¹²³ Kierkegaard, 445.

¹²⁴ Kierkegaard, 334.

the reflective, the sensual and the intellectual requires that there indeed be enough distance between the two for there to be the possibility of their effective harmony. But this necessitates that the seducer's *pièce de résistance* be dissonant. It must undercut the specious harmony attending Cordelia's "not subjectively reflective" forms of "imagination, spirit, passion – in short, all the essentials."¹²⁵ For Cordelia's sake, and perhaps no more or less for his own, Johannes must never fail to interest with the indistinctive allure of the unknown. He must remain, in some sense, un-interpretable, like a well-nuanced mood "she feels only esthetically,"¹²⁶ perhaps, as one might say, a deeply felt song.

The maintenance of the presence of contradiction and uncertainty in an interesting and alluring manner – if this is in any way a skill, Johannes transforms it into a genuine aesthetic art-form. He takes his inspiration and subject matter from the palette of desire's immediacy, which he, in turn, poetically infuses with the ambivalence of a spiritualized eroticism. It is in this way that he becomes the catalyst for and the witness of the concretion of love's ideality: in his words, "not just as someone being baptized but also as the priest."¹²⁷ While Johannes views himself as an artist whose medium is historically concrete enough to warrant description by analogy with sculpture, he does not skirt the operative paradox underlying a project of forming her in the way "a sculpture shapes her," while, at the same time, "shaping for [himself] a heart like unto hers."¹²⁸ Thought becomes passion or it ceases to be when struggling up against the ultimate non-

¹²⁵ Kierkegaard, 343.

¹²⁶ Kierkegaard, 309.

¹²⁷ Kierkegaard, 342.

¹²⁸ Kierkegaard, 388-389.

transparency of itself before itself conveyed in this thought. The subject matter of his art, the idea which it seeks to express, however, is as abstract as that belonging to the musical *Don Giovanni*; to wit, that force of sensual immediacy, immediate sensuality, that disrupts, without doing away with, the meaningfulness of those dualities, abstract/concrete, immediate/reflective, inner/outer, that serve as the limitative boundaries beyond which our thinking cannot think itself except, perhaps, as a longing for impossible understanding. For the reflective seducer, this desire translates into “the longing,” both in the sense of living within an aesthetically charged world and in that of its reflective expression of “the ideal in his words and thoughts.”¹²⁹ To the extent he succeeds, his achievements directly parallel those of the musical *Don Giovanni* whereby the opera’s communicative, seductive force “articulates this universality ... in the concretion of immediacy.”¹³⁰

Johannes’ ability to harness the erotic force of *Giovanni* is contingent upon his manipulation of his own image. His dissimulation, from Cordelia’s perspective, must be such that he perpetually eludes actuality, generating in the process the transference of the seductive effect of desire, from its source in the effect Cordelia has upon him, back to its source in the generation of erotic desire in Cordelia. Johannes’ brand of seduction takes the additional step of effectuating that this desire become reflectively self-aware. “What I taught her to sense by inciting her, my coldness will now teach her to comprehend, but in such a way that she will believe she herself discovers it,” says Johannes the seducer.¹³¹ This awareness is tantamount to that of possibility and thus, at the least indirectly, of

¹²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*.

¹³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 95.

¹³¹ Kierkegaard, 411-412.

freedom. The actuality of possibility as itself is not knowable, not, at least, in the abstract sense objects assume in relation to mind; yet, the *entelechia* of possibility, nonetheless, evidences itself as the longing for the actuality of an impossible ideality attending erotic desire. Erotic desire becomes, in effect, a form of communication, the transference of a longing to possess, to know that which remains un-known and thus possesses itself much power. This communication frequently comes in the form of a question – what does it mean to be this being that has its own being given to it in the form of a question spoken only by desire? – that is to say, a question posed by the erotic situation, one “silent ... yet eloquent,” that “gesticulates, does not speak,” and communicates in “enigmatic intimations” of “symbolic music.”¹³² Perhaps anxiety is the knowledge that one only stops attempting to answer the question in death.

The manipulation of image such that it is productive of unreflective desire becomes reflective and, consequently, spurs the erotic/intellectual chase for the ideal is characteristic of Kierkegaard’s writing. No one is left unaffected. Of himself in relation to Cordelia, with regard to the insubstantiality of possibility, Johannes states that he is “almost invisibly present when I am sitting visible at her side.” He continues with the elaborative imagery of the dance:

My relationship to her is like a dance that is supposed to be danced by two people but is danced by only one. That is, I am the other dancer, but invisible. She moves as if in a dream, and yet she is dancing with another, and I am that other one who, insofar as I am visibly present, is invisible, and insofar as I am invisible, is visible.¹³³

The invisibility of desire is the animating principle of the dance the movements of which lead ever further away from the binds of the actual into the rarefied ballroom of romantic

¹³² Kierkegaard, 418.

¹³³ Kierkegaard, 380.

love's ideality. That "a letter is a secretive communication" is due to the literal invisibility of its author and recipient to one another, the former, not there when read by its recipient, the latter, absent for the activity of the letter's composition. For both addressor and addressee this invisibility imparts more than the mere absence of the other. It is an invisibility, in effect, that plays a constitutive role in the erotic relationship; for the ideal of the beloved is never seen with the eyes, but only felt as a being moved by the music of desire's exigency. When composing a personal letter, the writer posits before himself an image to whom he imagines his communication is being addressed. Likewise, upon receiving such a letter, the reader posits before herself an image of its author, perhaps even imagines she hears his voice. The communication taking place is facilitated by the productive power of the imagination. It is this same means of facilitation that allows for experiences of possibility that exceed the capacity of all actual expression. Even when Johannes is physically present, he is not the actual person sitting with Cordelia, but the invisible author of a letter composed not to the actual girl sitting beside him, but to her image as a concrete actualization of the ideal – here it is the letter, not the author, that is invisible. Occasions for the communicative experience of possibility, each one for the other, the seducer takes his victim by the hand as "a dream," yet, as the "highest reality," and "in the moment of seduction leads her and is led by her outside of time, where as illusion she belongs."¹³⁴

When Johannes thus says that the letters are the real means of communication between him and Cordelia, it is evident that he indeed means as much as he says. Let us look at a few specific ways he uses the art of the letter as a pedagogical craft of seduction

¹³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, 80.

that seeks to occasion Cordelia's development, both intellectually and erotically. If these two categories, the intellectual and the erotic, correspond to the reflective and the immediate, an aesthetic understanding of the sensuous would be one informed by an experiential immediacy, a meaningfulness established via reflection, but in such a way that the consequent experience, now idealized, unbinds itself from reflection's arrogation to itself of this ability to make experience meaningful. Within the moment of controlled idealization the sensual and reflective interpenetrate as a desirous knowledge that craves, no less than it reflects, the ideal. And this moment is no less real than it is imaginative. Johannes is of a nature both "not abundant enough" and "not deficient enough," to sever "poetry and actuality from one another."¹³⁵ As he writes, he and Cordelia relate "in the imagination, which is the real line of communication between her and me ..."¹³⁶ The letters, to the extent they invoke the imagination, are the perfect medium for the mastery of the power of words that earlier in the book is stated to be the skill of the reflective seducer – their imaginative poetic power, their power to entice, disturb, excite, their power to seduce by communicating an ideality of possibility, to transfigure experience into a "poetic situation of actuality."¹³⁷ Seduction is a form of communication (possibly even, in some way communication's form) that "preserves the interesting precisely through the contradiction between the outward appearance and the inner life."¹³⁸ The degree to which the seductive becomes of educative benefit to the one seduced might be thought to match the degree to which it occasions and leaves behind a question of

¹³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 305.

¹³⁶ Kierkegaard, 391.

¹³⁷ Kierkegaard, 305.

¹³⁸ Kierkegaard, 438.

“infinite possibility.”¹³⁹ As “a communication in the form of a possibility,” such a question “compels the recipient to face the problem of existing in it, so far as this possible;”¹⁴⁰ in other words, this is a communication whose content makes of it a “concrete existence communication.”¹⁴¹

Intellectual development is facilitated by the interpretative, appropriative activity required for Johannes’ letters to be understood at all. The tension of the interesting develops the reflective. Aesthetic development, although in a sense concretely inseparable from the mental, is attested to by the perspicacity with which the imagery of the letters portray ambiguity at the center of the erotic as the enticement of the interesting, convey, that is, the conflict of the image with itself whereby the most concrete experience proves to be the most abstract idea. It is their musical effect that attests to this knowledge. Yet this musicality is their silence (only Mozart’s genius is capable of composing a more musical means of communication). They make of the vocal tonality indicative of irony, they make of hearing in this hyper-literal sense, a function of the imaginative. Distinctions between actuality and ideality, if maintained at all, are clouded by the resulting infusion of experience with a structure of *mythos*:

What she must learn is to make all the motions of infinity, to swing herself, to rock herself in moods, to confuse poetry and actuality, truth and fiction, to frolic in infinity ... then I will add the erotic; then she will be what I want ... then my duties will be over, my work ...¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Kierkegaard, 372.

¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 320. In Danish, this reads as: “En Fremstilling I Mulighedens Form lægger Modtageren det saa nær som det er muligt mellem Menneske og Menneske at existere deri.” Kierkegaard, 58.

¹⁴¹ Kierkegaard, 357.

¹⁴² Kierkegaard, 392.

In the dance of invisibility, he leading her by following her lead, Johannes and Cordelia “vanish into the air ... in a flight of thought.”¹⁴³ This flight is kept aloft by the zephyrs of mood, the aesthetic “kingdom,” which Johannes claims to “have dominion over.”¹⁴⁴ Like the god of wind, *Aeolus*, who kept his tempestuous offspring enclosed within his mountain, Johannes keeps watch over his “tempest of moods, keeping them shut up in the mountain of [his] personality,” allowing “one, now the other, to go out.”¹⁴⁵ The development of aesthetic sensibility is, in large part, the nurturing of a sensitivity to mood, and of mood’s relation to its setting, its situation, the full development of which manifests as mood’s presentiment of itself. “Just as an experienced sailor always scans the sea and detects a squall far in advance, so one should one always detect a mood a little in advance.”¹⁴⁶

At first, Johannes writes, his letters have Cordelia’s mental development as their specific goal; as such, the writing is characterized by dazzling feats of dialectical thinking that make an appeal to the intellect. They embody a sense of intrigue and mystery by delivering themselves in the form of a riddle to be solved.¹⁴⁷ In one of the earlier letters, for example, he writes:

How distant must an event be from us in time in order for us to recollect it; how distant so that recollection’s longing can no longer grasp it? In this

¹⁴³ Kierkegaard, 363.

¹⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, 400.

¹⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, 400.

¹⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, 299.

¹⁴⁷ The young girl as a riddle to be solved... note the play on words in the passage and its intimations of the constitutive role of languages own fragmented truth; the circularity here is similar to the girl possessing within herself her own solution, her riddle is that she is a being who possesses and expresses both the problem of her infinite deferral and her own solution. Adorno makes the exact same claim about the notion of a thought-image.

respect, most people have a limit; they cannot recollect what is too close in time, nor can they recollect what is too distant. I know no limit. Yesterday's experience I push back a thousand years in time and recollect it as if it were experienced yesterday.¹⁴⁸

This passage forms the conclusion of a much longer letter that takes the form of a confessional recollection of his being moved once while clandestinely listening to Cordelia's amateur piano playing of a sad Swedish melody "about the brief duration of youth and beauty." The words of this melody, he notes, "mock the girl's youth and beauty;" while, "the girl's youth and beauty mock the words."¹⁴⁹ Certainly we can rightfully conjecture that this piece of writing would furnish the young, imaginative but inexperienced Cordelia much over which to ponder with great interest. If nothing else, certainly she has never been privileged¹⁵⁰ to such intensely abstract yet sensually profuse communication from anyone before Johannes. This is like nothing she has known before: *a fortiori*, the letters are evocative of that world she has always known *via* the idealized realm of myth, legend, fairy-tales. The letters are disturbing and beautiful.

Kierkegaard's perorations are those of a master of the word; is he not the aesthetic philosopher, alluded to by Hegel, as "having just as much aesthetic power as the poet?"¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, 398.

¹⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 397. This letter is a model of Kierkegaard's appropriation of Platonic recollection. Any attempted explication of Kierkegaard's multi-faceted appropriation of Platonic epistemology would fill too many pages and require too much time (actually, be too risky) to attempt here and risk the high probability of, in the end, returning to the passage above for clarification.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard, *Stages On Life's Way* on Cordelia's fortune.

¹⁵¹ G.W.F. Hegel, "The Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism," *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 29. The authenticity of this piece of writing continues to be questioned, although from what I can gather consensus now points to there being little reason to do so. À propos this project, perhaps its authorial questionability would prove an asset. Regardless, the frame the early Hegel suggests for a new philosophy as an aesthetic mythology of reason is intriguing and seems strikingly appropriate for a description of a work such as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Imagine Cordelia's disorientation upon reading a moving description of a scene from her life, of having moved this stranger, now her betrothed, with her little, not insignificant, melody of demureness, of the realization that this stranger, unbeknownst to her, literally has had his eye on her. Johannes introduces himself here as invisibility. Generative of a dangerous excitement, not without a certain hint of transgression, the letters seduce. Cordelia becomes complicit in the illicit situation by retrospectively legitimizing the clandestine and furtive nature of Johannes' actions. She, in effect, grants him permission to look.

The tension of the interesting develops the reflective. While the letters are equally challenging to the intellect as they are alluring to the senses, Cordelia's mental development precedes that of the candidly erotic. The last line in the letter above is a puzzle, the abstract consideration of which places oneself, paradoxically, within the interpretive space of an active questioning of oneself in one's concretion. His letters confound and evoke. Johannes writes of the letters at this stage:

My letters are not failing of their intention. They are developing her mentally, even though not erotically. For that purpose, letters cannot be used, but notes. The more the erotic emerges, the shorter they become, but all the more unerringly they seize the erotic point (Danish) ... Distantly and indefinitely, the notes give a **presentiment** of the highest. The moment this **presentiment** begins to dawn in her soul, the connection is broken. Through my resistance, the presentiment will take form in her soul as if it were her own thought, the impulse of her own heart. This is just what I want.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 397. This particular passage provides a striking exemplar of how the writing, on occasion, will present itself more transparently in the form of a letter. Situated between two letters addressed to Cordelia, we find the short paragraph containing the quoted passage, whose address "to the dear reader" is left unwritten but strongly implied by its absence. It is joined in this between space by the report on Charlotte Hahn; she is a young girl who has such a powerful effect on Johannes' moods that he is willing to wait "two [hours] in the wind and the rain," just to attain the aesthetic effect of her greeting. This puts him in a mood he then turns and "squanders ... on Cordelia."

The intellect is challenged and, like Meno, Cordelia is “made perplexed,” seduced into the recognition of a Socratic form of non-knowledge and a recognition of appropriation’s role in truth – which is all to say, into an awareness of concrete existence.¹⁵³ The riddle possesses its own solution, “a secret,” comparable only to “the soul’s wealth,” in that it remains such “as long as the cord of the tongue is not loosened [*løst*] and thereby the riddle is solved [*lost*].”¹⁵⁴ The letter, as riddle whose solution is inseparable from the “infinite possibility that is the interesting”¹⁵⁵ is in-severable from the “illusiveness of the infinite in existence,” as Kierkegaard phrases it elsewhere.¹⁵⁶ The acquisition of presentiment is an established goal of the letters. Their enticement resides within their ability to enact their performance in such a way that builds the anticipatory excitement of the allurements of the unknown. This requires the participatory activity of the one to whom the performance is directed. The acquisition of presentiment might be synonymous with the communication of possibility. The letters certainly establish the anticipatory tonal mood of the next possible tryst, thereby allowing Johannes to build various levels of contrast and conflict between the engagement’s actuality and the ideality they convey.

The intellect’s interest is indifferent. An engaged dis-interest, attentive but aloof, perhaps entertained, but never entranced, it is eminently interesting, affording the first move of seduction as the apprehension of Cordelia’s interest. With the intellect Johannes neutralizes her femininity. The intellect does not recognize Cordelia as an immediate

¹⁵³ “... but she was not sufficiently developed for a Socratic tryst with the god in the idea of the boundless sea of uncertainty.” Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 88.

¹⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 330.

¹⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, 372.

¹⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 86.

erotic force. Her beauty is nullified by “prosaic good sense and ridicule, not directly but indirectly ... by the absolutely neutral, namely, intellect.”¹⁵⁷ On the contrary, it recognizes it only by disengaging from its effects. The intellect may serve to inflame sensuality, but not before disempowering the sensual erotic (positing it by its negation),¹⁵⁸ with the force of its indifference, be it feigned or not. Johannes’ insertion of himself into Cordelia’s experience transpires by means of the intellect’s indifference. The initial provocation of interest arises out of the simple contradiction between his presence in her life and his disinterest in her such that he encroaches upon her “disturbingly ... in a curiously undisturbing way.”¹⁵⁹ In relation to the letters, in his actual interactions and conversations with Cordelia, the seducer writes:

I continually bear *in mente* the content of my letters, always keeps an eye on the mood they may have evoked in her. Of course, it could never occur to me to ask whether she has read my letter. It is easy to ascertain that she has read it. Nor do I ever speak directly with her about it, but I maintain secret communication with them in my conversations, partly in order to fix more firmly in her soul some impression or other, partly in order to wrest it from her and make her perplexed. Then she can read the letter again and gain a new impression from it and so forth.¹⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Johannes’ letters, from which the following fragments are taken, have become notes:

... your eye has taught me to find myself in myself. I allow forgetfulness to consume everything that does not touch on you, and then I discover, a

¹⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 346.

¹⁵⁸ This provides the opportunity to refer back to how Christianity invented the sensually erotic as a category through its negation in the chapter on the opera.

¹⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, 341.

¹⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, 399-401. The last sentence easily applies to most of Kierkegaard’s writings, perhaps even to his entire *corpus*; they are after all, letters of the seducer.

pristine, a divinely young, primitive text; then I discover that my love for you is just as old as I myself.¹⁶¹

I am not; I have ceased to be, in order to be yours.¹⁶²

... but since my whole soul is full of you, life acquires another meaning for me – it becomes a myth about you.¹⁶³

It is still at times and reflects your image deeply and calmly. At times its fancies that it has taken your image captive and tosses up its waves to prevent you from escaping again; then it ripples its surface gently and plays with your image. At times it has lost it, and then its waves become dark and despairing – Just so is my soul – like a river that has fallen in love with you.¹⁶⁴

The Latinist says of an attentive pupil that he hangs on his teacher's lips. For love, everything is a symbol; in recompense, the symbol in turn is actuality. Am I not a diligent, attentive pupil? But you do not say a word.¹⁶⁵

Is an embrace a struggle?¹⁶⁶

... the image of an elf girl in his dreams? ... when my head inclines upon your bosom it is too deeply stirred for sleep to alight upon my eyes.¹⁶⁷

The Cordelia to whom these notes are addressed is an image. Although, read by this particular individual, Cordelia Wahl, the girl to whom this letter is addressed is an imaginary being. As the spectral reflection of herself, as the ideal of the beloved, as image, Cordelia's ideality is captured and reflected back to her as the poetic

¹⁶¹ Kierkegaard, 401.

¹⁶² Kierkegaard, 406.

¹⁶³ Kierkegaard, 407.

¹⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, 407.

¹⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, 418.

¹⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, 419.

¹⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, 420.

transfiguration of experience.¹⁶⁸ And what is the form of her ideality? Possibility – that about which, no one could say a word. Within the mirror of the letter, who does the looking in is other than who looks out. The reader becomes transfixed by this, her own reflection; it is given back to her, as is her “every chance remark, every casual word,” such that “it always becomes something more significant, which she both recognizes and does not recognize.”¹⁶⁹ Everything is a symbol within such a poetic reflection. Love is the symbol of a something more, a striving, a holding open performed by the strength of a contradiction. She begins to recognize her own reflection, her own image as reflected back to her, in terms of this something more. Johannes annihilates himself in service to the ideal of erotic love such that he becomes nothing more, or nothing less, than himself a symbol of this something more (possibility), an image of erotic love’s ideality – of the same sensuous immediacy earlier stated to be inexpressible outside of music. This is the force of sensuality that is music, whose form, the musical, the heights of abstraction, is inseparable from its content, the communicative performance of non-reflected sensuous desire, at the excesses of concretion.

“I am looking for immediacy. That the individuals first exist for one another in its instant is the eternal element in love.”¹⁷⁰ The paradox is that this is the very moment that neither exist. The individuals come into existence for one another not as one another but as instantiations of ideality of possibility. The contradiction is that they are no more one than the other, no more the ideal than the actual. Poetry, after all, deliberately confounds the distinction. Yet, the distinction itself will not entirely vanish as it is the condition for

¹⁶⁸ “Trolls, monsters, enchanted princesses, appear in the world of actuality.”

¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, 420.

¹⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, 317.

the poetic, and for much more than that. Later, the pseudonym *Anti-Climacus*, will write of the “sign of contradiction” as the image by means of which indirect communication takes place:

... and look, as one is looking one sees in mirror, one comes to see oneself, or he who is the sign of contradiction looks straight into one’s heart while on is staring into the contradiction. A contradiction places squarely in front of a person ... is a mirror ... It is a riddle, but as he is guessing the riddle, what dwells within him is disclosed by the way he guesses.¹⁷¹

If Kierkegaard’s texts are mirrors, what they reflect back to the reader is his own ideality but, in such a way that awareness is brought to the way the act of reflection is in large part the means by which the ideality is established. Possibility is the form of their reflection. Communicating possibility is to convey a truth so abstract that the edifices of systematic abstraction are incapable of gripping it; simultaneously, it is to convey a truth the ramifications of which are so concrete that even the smallest and first step into reflection, dependent upon abstraction as it is, the step necessary for any objective communication (communication whose form and contents differ), appears to annihilate the concretion of its existence it is seeking to express. An impossible communication of possibility generates desire for the unknown, the ideal. It generates the desire to know oneself that is inseparable from the awareness of the impossibility of ever fully fulfilling this desire – not “to know thyself,” but “to desire to know oneself,” is this not the very first dictum of first philosophy? It is the role of the teacher to be the occasion for desire coming to know itself in this way, as not knowing itself, as infinitely ignorant. For this

¹⁷¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 126-127.

venture, the would-be philosopher must be one of those not of the day individuals, about whom Hegel said would have: “just as much aesthetic power as the poet.”¹⁷²

Judge Wilhelm, the author of the second volume of *Either/Or*, the ethical persona, in his letter to the aesthete sums up Johannes’ pedagogy:

... generally your main occupation tends to destroy illusions and occasionally maneuver people into illusions. When ... with ... one or two young men, how with a few motions you have already helped them a considerable distance beyond all the childish ... helpful illusions, how they now become lighter than actuality, how their wings shoot out, while you ... give then an idea ... whereby one can fly all over existence ... when you conduct the same training of young girls, how one hears the wing beat in masculine flight, whereas feminine flight is like rowing dreamily – when one sees this, who then because of your skill can be angry with you, but who because of your wanton irresponsibility ought not to be angry with you.¹⁷³

As was said previously, the educational aspect of seduction can be taken to stem from its potency to disillusion by means of occasioning the creation within someone’s experience of ideality. In the case of erotic love, through the manifest creation of an ideality of the greatest strength and thus generative of the most prodigious desire, one is pulled far into the flight into the ideal – even so far that one loses sight of the ground, of that foundation of un-reflected beliefs and practices that are formative of one’s experience of self. The ground reveals itself to be illusion, and a grand one at that. But then, after being set aloft, “the letters stop,” and at that point, awareness of “seeking repose in a picture that is not

¹⁷² Hegel, “The Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism,” 29.

¹⁷³ And this is all we will allow the judge to say at present. I am compelled to justify his exclusion from the above discussion. Suffice it to say that this passage, more or less, says it all about the ethical; well it says all that needs to be said. Paramount is that it claims the transparency of self-foundation – what, for the aesthetic and religious is definitive, the problematization of disclosure and communication of the self to others and to itself, the ethical solves in the self’s giving to itself its own structure and foundation. The problem is that, at the same time, Kierkegaard’s works actively repel the positioning necessary for taking any view upon themselves too seriously and we might be guilty of being overly stodgy in taking the very position upon the texts that allows us to make the distinction in terms of transparency in this way.

seen” is created. The object of desire becomes Johannes and thereby Cordelia “becomes the temptress who seduces ... into going beyond the boundary of the universal.”¹⁷⁴ The letters stop and “erotic love is mocked as something ludicrous ... she will want to make me captive with the same means I have employed against her – with the erotic.”¹⁷⁵

Cordelia breaks the engagement. So it is implied. She willingly breaks the binds of the universal in favor of her absolute. Is this the ineffable particular showing itself by sacrificing its own intelligibility before itself, by giving everything over to ideality’s desire, by becoming art?¹⁷⁶ She gives Johannes everything. “This a-temporal ideality provides the occasion for aesthetic education.”¹⁷⁷ The lesson of her aesthetic education results from the timbre of the possible resounding against itself, the crash of the cymbals of ideality as they play out possibility in infinite reflection upon itself. As Cordelia attempts to make sense of the entire ordeal, her seduction and abandonment, she will be compelled to recognize the distinction between the inner and outer, that there is a distinction, that is, of significance. Moreover, she must also interpret the nature of the distinction by means of no one but herself and her newfound reflective insertion into existence. She is not able to discover evidence inherent to the experience that would establish one potential interpretation as conclusively preferable to another. It nonetheless must be “interpreted one way or the other.”¹⁷⁸ Her tongue is now multiple. She has come

¹⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, 425.

¹⁷⁵ Kierkegaard, 421.

¹⁷⁶ Foreshadowing chapter four on *Fear and Trembling*.

¹⁷⁷ Mark Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 98.

¹⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 370.

into an awareness of the contingency of freedom, of how it is by means of a reflective speculation upon the inexhaustible yet, until now, unconsidered possibilities that we come to speak at all.¹⁷⁹

Is it possible to “exhaust ... the potency of the interesting?” Or do we become bored (perhaps simply indolent). Do we have an idea of her, the young girl, the one whose “possibility, this marvelous thing that is so infinitely fragile ... so infinitely frail,”¹⁸⁰ is in some way our own. If truth hangs on Cordelia’s lips, she will not let it speak. Like her namesake, and not only in name, her love is certainly “more ponderous than [her] tongue.” And like King Lear’s daughter she “cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth,”¹⁸¹ as her “lips were mute when her heart was full.”¹⁸² “Then Poor Cordelia?”¹⁸³ Are we to pity her for not existing? For seducing us? For being pseudonymous “to the core?” The young girl’s song is the letter *par excellence*. And “The person who is unable to write letters and notes never becomes a dangerous seducer.”¹⁸⁴ Are you, too, a pseudonym?

iv: Images of Presentiment

VORGEFÜL

¹⁷⁹ Cf. The treatment of Eve and the serpent in Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Anxiety*.

¹⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 251.

¹⁸¹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, lines 78-79.

¹⁸² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 336. This parallel is obviously of unnoted importance.

¹⁸³ Kierkegaard, 337. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way*, where a girl’s seduction is said to be a fortunate event.

¹⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, 582.

Ich bin wie eine Fahne von Fernen umgeben.
Ich ahne die Winde, die kommen, und muß sie leben,
während die Dinge unten sich noch nicht rühren;
die Türen schließen noch sanft, und in den Kaminen ist Stille;
die Fenster zittern noch nicht, und der Staub ist noch schwer.

Da weiß ich die Stürme und bin erregt wie das Meer.
Und breite mich aus und falle in mich hinein
und werfe mich ab und bin ganz allein
in dem großen Sturm.

Presentiment

I am like a flag surrounded by distances.
I sense the winds that are coming, and must live them,
while the things underneath are not yet stirred:
the doors still close softly, and within the Chimneys is Silence;
the windows are not yet trembling, and the dust is heavy still.

Then I know the storms already and become erect like the sea.
And break out of myself and fall into myself
and throw myself off and am entirely alone
in the large storm.

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Buch der Bilder, The Book of Images*).¹⁸⁵

Any truth that changes the individual, which results in a new found sense of awareness inseparable from the activity of who we are, is communicated and known only with the aid of the productive force of the imagination – its ability to create and hold open. This being the case, the aesthetic realm and knowledge of one's participation within it is always an integral and necessary component of any transformative knowledge.

¹⁸⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Images*, 92-93. Translation modified.

Chapter II

Adorno's Aesthetic Construction of Kierkegaard

Don Juan symbolizes the unity of sensuality and abstraction. When Kierkegaard says that in him sensuality is comprehended as a principle, he touches on the secret of sensuality itself. In the fixity of its gaze, until self-reflection dawns, is the very anonymity, the unhappy generality, that is fatefully reproduced in its negative, the unfettered sovereignty of thought (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*).¹

i: Construction of the Pseudonymous Subject

*I am a pseudonym.*²

Adorno initiates his study of Kierkegaard with the disruptive contention that “all attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content.”³ Yet within the first few pages, directly in the shadow of this declaration, we find him openly employing a style of conceptual analysis that proceeds, in large part, by

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 90.

² Kierkegaard, *Papier*, X2 A 89, as translated and quoted by Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 28.

³ Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 3.

means of the development of metaphor, with the use of a poetic, and thus illicit, device. He thereby, however indirectly, begins his study of the thinker who famously attempted to write “without authority” with the crafted undermining of his own. The use of the pseudonym as a means of authorial disavowal effectuates a distancing that is productive of a text’s capacity for poetic enchantment. Such fascination is the effect of the aesthetic about which Adorno gives us fair warning, as it “is the most dangerous power in his [Kierkegaard’s] work.”⁴ Should we, then, not also be wary of Adorno’s capacity to enchant with literary stylization? While there is no ready answer to such a question, I do believe we are warranted in holding the contention that Adorno’s approach to Kierkegaard, his methodology, as it were, is that of a rigorously applied *mimesis*. In effect, Adorno’s reading comes as close to a Kierkegaardian reading of Kierkegaard as we might imagine possible. His is a veritable immanent critique. In remaining as close to the internal dialectical workings of Kierkegaard’s thought, Adorno’s critique is at times most damaging to some of the most accepted tenets of Kierkegaard’s existential brand of thought. At the same time, very few, if any, interpretations of Kierkegaard can match the depth of insight with which Adorno is able to penetrate his work. Adorno’s understanding of the issue of the pseudonymous status of Kierkegaard’s most influential writings is exemplary of the disruptive/productive character of his approach. What follows is an explication and analysis of Adorno’s understanding of the complicated relation of poetry and philosophy in Kierkegaard’s thought as found in the first chapter, entitled “Exposition of the Aesthetic,” of his book, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*.

⁴ Adorno, 11.

“The first concern of the construction of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is to distinguish it from poetry.”⁵ Adorno rejects outright any uncritical acceptance of Kierkegaard’s claim to be a poet, noting that, on occasion, Kierkegaard also rejected being identified with the title.⁶ After noting that for most readers, the pseudonym’s have served “as powers of fascination;” he states that any rejection of Kierkegaard’s claim to be a poet, in effect, excludes the pseudonyms from comprising “the constitutive element in his philosophy;” moreover, “the possibility of a method fundamentally oriented toward them [the pseudonyms] is therefore precluded.”⁷ By setting for his analysis the goal of disarming the pseudonyms of their power of enchantment, however, he inadvertently grants the pseudonymous character of Kierkegaard’s writings immense power. That is to say, it should not go unnoticed that he apparently allocates to the pseudonyms the seductive prowess of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic; moreover, he suggests that this accordance between the seductive and the pseudonymous extends to the construction of “the aesthetic” as a philosophical concept. He continues:

Every interpretative effort that unreflectively accepts the claim of the particular pseudonyms and measures itself by this claim misses the mark. They are not living bodies in whose incomparable existence intention is densely embedded. They are altogether abstract representational figures.⁸

Most attempts to understand Kierkegaard, by this standard, have been flawed, have fallen victim to the text’s poetic enchantment and thus have understood it as poetry, instead of philosophy. Kierkegaard’s work is, first and foremost for Adorno, a dialectical form of

⁵ Adorno, 5.

⁶ Adorno takes a citation from Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*: “I am no poet and I go at things only dialectically.” Kierkegaard, 5.

⁷ Adorno, 11.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 11.

philosophy. He does not appear to waver in this contention. The task of one who would wish to critically read Kierkegaard's work is not the uncovering of a deeply buried, secretive and hidden, subjective intention, but rather the outlining of the abstract conceptual constellation that exists on the literal surface of his literary tinged thought.

After having declared any undue attention given to Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to be, at best, merely vehicles through which the reader falls victim to the seduction of the aesthetic, Adorno turns the tables on our expectations. He without equivocation states: "This is not to say that criticism can ever disregard their [i.e., the pseudonyms] function and take their opinion as Kierkegaard's own." As we have seen, this is exactly the interpretative misstep that the majority of the established scholarship accepts as reason well enough for an outright dismissal of Adorno's interpretation. Recall, if you will, that the accepted view of Adorno's Kierkegaard is quite negative. If there were any substantive weight behind the unfavorable treatment Adorno's work has received, we would expect it to be found in arguments that set out to demonstrate how Adorno blatantly fails to heed his self-established criteria of critical evaluation. However, no such arguments are made and while it is not difficult to believe that Adorno may contradict himself, at times, no doubt, quite intentionally, to believe that Adorno naively ascribes the viewpoints of any of a number of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms to anything remotely resembling a singular subject at work behind the literary production as its puppet master is only to demonstrate one's lack of familiarity with Adorno's approach. Taking into consideration Adorno's statement above wherein he explicitly states that one cannot fully disregard the functionality of the pseudonyms, considering that those who have had the most to do with the shaping of the direction of Kierkegaard scholarship,

those whom I believe we can safely assume to have read this statement, are responsible for creating the climate of general dismissal within which Adorno's text finds itself situated primarily by propagating the view that Adorno ignores the pseudonym's significance, it seems that something is amiss. It is even likely that the common viewpoint that takes Kierkegaard to be the puppet master behind a literary theatre of edification, the view I expect popular among Adorno's detractors, expresses more effective disregard for the pseudonym's significance than any seeming role attributed to them within Adorno's analysis. At the very least, Adorno's work on Kierkegaard has been misunderstood and prematurely dismissed.⁹

It appears, then, that Adorno is in agreement with his critics: the pseudonymous status of Kierkegaard's writings prevents ascribing any of their views to Kierkegaard as their author. The function of the pseudonyms cannot be disregarded. Any disagreement, we might imagine, would come from Adorno's maxim that, nonetheless, they should not be taken as the primary constituents of Kierkegaard's philosophy. This is to say that they do not play a role, perhaps even a formative one. Adorno's interpretation of their significant function is astrological in its approach. From the distinctly modernist viewpoint employed by Adorno, the pseudonyms are not pieces of a puzzle the solution to which is the uncovering of the secrecy of the systematic unity of position they together express, but they are points within a constructed framework of a conceptual aesthetics the form of which is analogous to the figuration of stars within a constellation. For Adorno, the pseudonyms have not function distinct from the positions they express; in other words, the pseudonymous writing of any particular pseudonym serves as the construction

⁹ Cf. pages 20-23 of this study for the detailed overview of the treatment, or lack thereof, Adorno's book has received at the hands of the Kierkegaardians.

of a point on the elaborate mosaic construction that is Kierkegaard's authorship. Considered in this manner, any philosophy expressed by the pseudonyms is not eclipsed in being mistaken for poetry. What the pseudonyms serve to express is philosophical insofar as they together form both a presentation of and commentary upon the limitations imposed upon self-understanding by language – ultimately, they put on display the pseudonymous nature of the subject. Philosophical criticism must:

confront the abstract figures of the pseudonyms as a group with the concrete motives encompassed by the framework of pseudonymity and to determine the coherence of the organization accordingly. Under this pressure the deceptive consistency of the pseudonyms may crumble ... Criticism must first understand the assertions of the pseudonyms in terms of their philosophical construction; it must understand how this construction may be demonstrated in every instance as a dominating schema.¹⁰

It is not that the pseudonyms have nothing to say. Rather what they are to say

that is more than what the philosophical schematism had intended, their secret and concrete essence, falls, in the literalness of the disclosure, into the hands of interpretation. No writer is more cunning in his choice of words than Kierkegaard or aims at concealing more through his language than he who inexhaustibly denounced himself ... as a dialectical seducer.

A constellation is contingent upon the creative perception of the stargazer, it is the result of a form of interpretation. To take the significance of Kierkegaard's philosophy to reside in its success or failure as poetry would overlook the philosophical character of the highlighting of this element of interpretation. "Without exception," Adorno writes, "the origin of the name poetry in Kierkegaard's work is transparently philosophical."¹¹

According to Geoffrey Hale:

¹⁰ Adorno, 11.

¹¹ Adorno, 6.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymity is no aberration of language. It is not a trick he is playing as an authoritative author to seduce his readers into one or another belief. Rather it is already inherent in language itself; it is the very requirement of language.¹²

The appropriation of this insight requires a general re-orientation toward the interpretation of Kierkegaard's philosophy. Language is the seducer, an active source of the production of deception necessary for the establishment of the duality between the speaker and what is spoken, a deception perhaps necessary for the adequation of the "real" with a "binding nexus of concepts."¹³ Language is the seducer, an active source for the communicative construction of any form of truth that succeeds in going beyond that which language can express. Hale continues:

Language and subjectivity remain irreconcilable, and this irreconcilability itself exceeds the delimitations of cognition. It cannot itself be known within language, because it is already the effect of language. Language produces the subject as its own excluded outside. To say "I," in this sense, is to be used by language without knowing it. And the moment it appears to be known and understood by the speaking subject itself would be occluded by the very language it speaks and by which it appears to "know."¹⁴

The undermining of oneself, of the integrity of one's authority, is an event that transpires every time the abstractions of language are enlisted as means of expressing the concretion of experience. But this is not saying that there is an integral self to be found apart from or behind the generalities of language through which its coherency is shaped. The particularity attending any act of expression cannot be accounted for with the use of words, cannot, that is, be expressed itself. Perhaps this particularity could, in some manner, nonetheless, be experienced, become, that is, the content of an experience. If so,

¹² Hale, 28.

¹³ Adorno, 3.

¹⁴ Hale, 28-29.

the only evidence that could be provided for such experiential knowledge of particularity would be in the communication of the experience of the awareness of inexpressibility.

The mechanistic operations of such the success of such communication could only themselves expresses negatively as the productive element of language's failure to express. As we will see as this study progresses, communication *via* an involvement of the reader in the process of the disintegration of comprehension will be a strategy employed by both Kierkegaard and Adorno in the formulations of their strategic writings styles.

In summation, let us take note of one important conclusion to be drawn from the above and salient to our exploration of Kierkegaard's aesthetic, guided as it currently is by Adorno's direction. "Kierkegaard's pseudonymity is not a refusal to assume authority over what he has written," or rather perhaps it would be more precise to state that it is not only that; rather, it is closer to "the logical effect of every text's finitude."¹⁵ The element of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard's texts must be encountered as constructive of their philosophical content that is not separable from the aesthetic form through which any truth in this regard might be expressed.

¹⁵ Hale, 32.

Excursus A: The Constellational Roots of Adorno's Philosophy

a: Modern Aesthetics in Miniature

The importance of the role played by aesthetics in the historical development of modern philosophy is often downplayed in deference to a Cartesian inspired emphasis on epistemological methodology. While it may seem possible, as a result of this emphasis, to delineate a historical overview of modern philosophy without a discussion of aesthetics, to do so risks misunderstanding the subtlety of modern thought. Indeed, an argument can be made in support of the claim that aesthetics is of central concern to modern philosophy, that philosophy has never strayed far from the Platonic struggle with appearances that shaped its beginnings, that much depends upon what philosophy makes of aesthetic experience.¹⁶ In a chapter of his recently translated work, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Martin Seel offers the reader “A Rough History of Modern Aesthetics” that traces its development along the lines of a struggle to comprehend the aesthetic experience of particularity. His analysis is directed toward revealing how, in his words, “perceiving the unfathomable particularity of a sensuously given, we gain insight into the indeterminable presence [*Gegenwart*] of our lives,” such that “attentiveness to what is

¹⁶ The role the *Critique of Judgment* plays in Kant's critical philosophy is the subject of much debate. I find much credence in the suggestion that it was Kant's attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the mechanistic determination of experience, as he outlined in his discussion of the categories of the understanding in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the self-legislative capacity he accords to the will in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. One possibility is that aesthetic experience as a form of sensuous knowledge, independent of the determinate function of the categories, provides the evidence, so to speak, of the freedom of the human spirit (an experience of noumenal ideality). As this study progresses, I intend to sketch out a reading of the role that ideality plays in Kant's philosophy and, in turn, in that of Kierkegaard and Adorno's. (For a helpful overview of the various debates around this issue see Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) and his essays on the sublime in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

appearing is... at the same time attentiveness to ourselves.”¹⁷ His historical sketch of the theme of indeterminacy is exemplary in its articulation of the background out of which, and frequently against which, Adorno’s aesthetic approach to philosophy took its stand. While Kierkegaard is not included in the analysis, Seel’s historical overview sheds a contextual light on Kierkegaard’s attempt at the articulation of the individual’s experience of his own singularity; in doing so, it facilitates the goal of rendering Adorno’s thought accessible to his Kierkegaardian detractors. Hopefully, the following miniaturization of Seel’s already brief historical statement serves further to demonstrate, however indirectly, the shared roots of Kierkegaard’s existential aesthetics and Adorno’s conceptual aesthetics and to facilitate an understanding of how the latter’s took as one of its major points of departure the former’s.

Within the staccato prose of his last major work, the incomplete and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes: “In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist.”¹⁸ The degree to which what is non-existent can nonetheless be said to make an appearance within aesthetic experience and as to why the experience of appearances is accorded so much weight in Adorno’s thought is only hinted at: “The artwork as appearance is most closely resembled by the *apparition*, the heavenly

¹⁷ Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), xi. Seel is the pre-eminent philosophical aesthetician working in Germany today. His work can be seen to be born out of a reading of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, and of critical theory, that stands in defense of Adorno’s philosophy against its Habermasian influenced detractors. This is not to say that he stands against Habermas, *per se*, but rather that his appropriation of Adorno does not begin by situating itself within Habermas’ communicative turn. Also of note in this regard is the recent work of Gerhard Richter. He too can be understood to appropriate Adorno’s thinking from a position more indifferent to than against the communicative rationality of Habermas. Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Image: Frankfurt School Writer’s Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Richter’s conceptualization of the *Denkbild* is addressed in detail later in this chapter.

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 28.

vision.”¹⁹ Indeterminacy is constitutive of the apparition. That the aesthetic experience of the indeterminate be a non-conceptual knowledge of particularity is the task of modern aesthetic philosophy. Seel begins his history by naming Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* as the first attempt to conceive of aesthetics as “a new and hitherto neglected form of epistemology,” by concerning itself with “not only beautiful objects of nature or art... but with a special faculty of perception,” labeled “sensuous knowledge (*cognitio sensitiva*).”²⁰ In contrast to the consideration of the universal characterizing classification, this aesthetic form of knowledge addresses the particular; it seeks to “know the particular in its particularity” by apprehending the “intuitive density” of appearance “through a sensuous comprehension that lingers with a thing or a situation in the individuality of its appearing.”²¹ Aesthetic knowledge lacks the distinctness of conceptual-propositional knowledge but does not lack in clarity—it is, in a sense, the non-reflective apprehension of the clarity of the indistinct as such, the indeterminacy of the particular that outstrips the comprehensive power of the understanding’s ability to distinguish. To what extent does this experience qualify as veritable knowledge? Is the

¹⁹ Adorno, 80. The fact that Adorno rarely used such explicitly religious imagery is noteworthy. Maintaining his purely negative dialectical method of criticism would seem to preclude the transcendental suggestiveness of religious language. Yet, that there is a “transcendental necessity” at work in Adorno’s negative dialectics is suggested by Brian O’Conner in his recent work, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). This presentation of Adorno as a transcendental philosopher concerned with an articulation of the structuring possibilities of experience takes a stand against the generally accepted interpretation of him as a philosopher of immanence in the Nietzschean vein. While O’Conner’s work attempts to provide the much needed detailed analysis of Adorno’s philosophy as it is in dialogue with the epistemological issues of German Idealism, it does not concern itself with the role of the “transcendental” as the aesthetic content of religious experience (what Adorno calls Metaphysical or Philosophical Experience). The recent translation of Hent De Vries’ *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) will hopefully serve to bring attention to this much overlooked dimension of Adorno’s thought. For our current purposes suffice it to say for now that the question and role of transcendence is that of the aesthetic philosopher’s experiential contact with actuality.

²⁰ Seel, 2.

²¹ Seel, 2-3.

paradoxical form taking shape here as its expression not the only way of articulating that peculiar knowledge of the limitations of knowledge that is the hallmark of modern critical philosophy?

These questions broached by the consideration of a uniquely aesthetic experience are rigorously taken up by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Seel notes that Kant's characterization of aesthetic experience is one of "numerous paradoxical determinations," the kernel of which is that "all the *powers* of knowledge are involved in aesthetic perception," while "what matters in aesthetic perception is not an acquisition of knowledge."²² Aesthetic perception is not a knowing of the objects of perception but takes as its "object" the processes of the objects' appearance. Thus, it does not contribute knowledge of the object of perception but does require, nonetheless, the existence of the epistemic object of perceptual experience. "Without being reduced to this or that determination, the object is perceived solely in the presence of its appearing," by the means of a suspension of the epistemic determination of experience by the subject. As a suspended determination of experience as knowledge of an object, aesthetic experience becomes one of an experienced "*free play* of cognitive powers" that is synonymous with "a particular *givenness* of phenomena," that only gives itself through an attentiveness to an object's presence that foregoes concern with any "cognitive or practical result."²³ Aesthetic experience, however, is not of no concern to those concerned with the acquisition of such results for it is the exercise of the negative form of freedom that is the condition for the possibility of the knowledge of "the extensive determinacy of reality by

²² Seel, 3.

²³ Seel, 4.

us human beings.”²⁴ Kant’s account of aesthetic experience is the point within his work where the domains of aesthetics, epistemology and ethics intersect. In attuning itself to the non-purposiveness of appearance, aesthetic perception is “free from the constraints of conceptual knowing, free from the reckoning of instrumental action... free as well from the conflict between duty and inclination... free from the compulsion to determine ourselves and the world [and thus] free to experience the *determinacy* of ourselves and the world.”²⁵ Much is dependent upon what philosophy is to make of aesthetic experience.

Kant’s explication of aesthetics prioritizes the natural as the content of experience, in terms of its beauty or sublimity, both of which offer themselves as possibilities for affirmation of the capacities of the human spirit over the natural.²⁶ Hegel’s dialectical mistrust of the dichotomy of nature and artifice results in a turn toward aesthetics as a philosophical investigation into the composition of the artwork proper. While the definition of a work of art as “an appearance that means something”²⁷ might be broadly construed as an apparent equation of experience itself with the aesthetic, Seel notes that, for Hegel, the meaning of the artwork is, following Kant in this regard, the mode of its appearance itself rather than what could be said to appear. “The

²⁴ Seel, 5.

²⁵ Seel, 4-5.

²⁶ Kant does, of course, discuss *Schönes Kunst* in the *Critique of Judgment*. Yet, the standard with which it is judged to be fine is subordinated to natural beauty: “fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as art.” It is “nature” that is said to provide “the rule to art” through the “innate mental predisposition [of] genius.” Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 174. Kant’s analysis of genius as the facility to produce “aesthetic ideas,” which “connect language” with “spirit,” will be the subject of a detailed analysis in the fourth chapter of this study. Kant, 185. I contend there that the concept of “aesthetic idea” can serve as a hermeneutical model for the explication of the function of imagery in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre.

²⁷ Hegel, as quoted by Seel, 5.

meaning of an artwork is tied to the particular sensuous execution of the individual work. Like the simple object of nature, the work of art appears in its individual form; but... this is a matter of an articulated (or, even better, an articulating) process of appearing.”²⁸ Since artworks speak their own appearance,²⁹ their content must be read (or heard) by an “interpretative perception that pursues in sensuous attentiveness, the constellations and correspondences of the sculptured, gestural, visual, or aural appearance of the work.”³⁰ The work of the artwork as the presentation of its appearance involves the interpretative appropriation of its material content: its meaning, as it were, is bespoken as the partial knowing of the absolute particular to its cultural and historical embodiment. Countering the a-historical transcendentalism of Kant’s subject, the artworks’ indeterminacy presents itself not as the possibility of determination experienced as respite from its obligation but rather as the necessity of interpretative determination—not indeterminate as such but the partiality of the determinate is what the artwork presents for Hegel. “Thus artworks are not just indescribable events of appearing but also an inexhaustible expression of the human spirit. The work of art presents its own appearing in order to allow forms of human world encounter to appear.”³¹ If the representational capacities of art once stood at the pinnacle of knowledge, as Hegel seems to claim was the case in classical Greek culture, that this can no longer be held true today in the absolute sense does not annihilate

²⁸ Seel, 5.

²⁹ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno discusses the linguistic character of art as best comparable to writing. Discussing Klee’s incorporation of “scrawled writing” into his drawings, he writes: “Like a searchlight, this category of modern art illuminates the art of the past; all artworks are writing, not just those that are obviously such; they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost, a loss that plays into their content. Artworks are language only as writing.” Adorno, 124.

³⁰ Seel, 5.

³¹ Seel, 6.

the power of art to know. While the movement of the dialectic surpasses the knowledge of art with that of religion only to be supplanted by the rational comprehension of philosophy, art might be understood nonetheless to be a legitimate means of “the presentation of historical perspectives and life forms,” even if no longer the representation of eternal powers of determination. Hegel does not abandon art but appropriates (*Aufhebung*) its meaning into the dialectical approach of his speculative comprehension; in this way, Hegel could be thought to accord much to aesthetic experience.³²

Seel’s reading of Schopenhauer is highly critical of the importance he grants to the subject of aesthetic intuition. Although he is rightfully understood to “support and amplify the view defended by Kant and Hegel that aesthetic perception enables distance both to conceptual knowledge and to teleological action,” Seel understands Schopenhauer’s thesis to be “that the subject of aesthetic intuition *abandons* the world of empirical appearances in favor of a contemplation of Platonic Ideas.” Aesthetic perception for Schopenhauer is escapism from the suffering of concreteness; its aim is to overcome the world by exposing the empirical as semblance and, thus, effectuating a release of the will from its confinement therein. Nietzsche stands out against this attempt at a “radical exit from the world,” by understanding the disruptive effects of art’s “distance to the interpreted world,” not as a “going beyond the world of appearances but rather a radical losing of oneself in this world.”³³ Nietzsche transforms the position on

³² Indeed in Adorno’s hands the experiential dimension of Hegel’s thought is irreducible; that is to say, that to comprehend Hegel, one must inhabit the dialectic and this inhabitation is, in part, an experience rightfully described as aesthetic. See Adorno’s essay “Skoteinos, or how to read Hegel,” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 89-148.

³³ Seel, 7-8.

aesthetics he inherits from Kant and Hegel in significant ways. The first, noted by Seel, is the Nietzschean corrective to Kant's understanding of aesthetic pleasure. It is not "the determinacy – and thus the ultimate controllability" of experienced reality that is truly pleasurable, but rather "the indeterminacy and ultimate uncontrollability of the real." Aesthetic pleasure is guided by the pull of the unknown and unformed against the determinative structuring of experience by the mind; at the same time, the possibility it represents, that of stepping "out of the confines of convention," is dependent upon these confines, insofar as "it is only within a context of meanings that remains within reach that this departure can be experienced as an abysmal moment of ecstasy."³⁴ For Nietzsche, it is the breakdown of experience's coherency in an "ecstatic self abnegation" of the subject that is pleasing.³⁵ Secondly, Nietzsche is said to go further than Kant in reasoning how "aesthetic perception does indeed have a great affinity to knowledge but must not be apprehended from beginning to end as knowledge," at accounting for how "the intensity of perception and that of knowledge can diverge."³⁶ In short, Seel attributes to Nietzsche the recognition of a type of "sensuous perception" that extends beyond "epistemic consciousness" as an "acoustic or visual resonating, of an occurrence without anything recognizably occurring."³⁷ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the work of art

³⁴ Seel, 8-9.

³⁵ That the individual takes pleasure in the destruction of self did not go unnoticed by Kierkegaard; notwithstanding that it has rarely been noted. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he discusses as one form of despair (the refusal to be what one is) the pleasure the self takes in destroying itself and the tempting nature the option of suicide assumes as a result. Freud's thematic interrelating of *Eros* and *Thanatos* was no doubt much inspired by Nietzsche's thinking but the possible influence of Kierkegaard on both Freud and Nietzsche in this regard has not been discussed.

³⁶ Seel, 9.

³⁷ Seel, 9. As he notes, the third chapter of his book is devoted to an explication of this enigmatic acoustic resonating.

to be constituted by the tensional interplay of the forces of Apollonian order and Dionysian disorder such that an artwork's form must be understood as never static but as "a form-building *process* that continuously switches all meanings back into an a-semantic appearing."³⁸

It was not, however, from Nietzsche that appearances were to receive an unambiguous apology. For Seel, this was the task of the next figure in his historical trajectory, Paul Valéry. Seel's discussion focuses on Valéry's Platonic dialogue *Eupalinos, or the Architect*. There, Phaedrus and Socrates have a discussion about the relationship between music and architecture in terms of experiences of the beautiful and the manner in which they differ from the contemplation of eternal ideas:

Phaedrus: But still, did you never meet among men some whose singular passion for forms and appearances [*gulière pour les formes et les apparences*] surprised you?

Socrates: No doubt.

Phaedrus: And yet whose intelligence and virtues were inferior to none.

Socrates: To be sure I did.

The disembodied shades in Hades long for the sensuous experiences of architecture and music that are no longer available to them. Phaedrus proceeds to recollect the sensuous pleasure that has been lost:

Phaedrus: But I live again, I see once more the ephemeral skies!
What is most beautiful finds no place in the eternal.

Socrates: All this rings strange in the place where we are. Now that we are deprived of our bodies, we must assuredly bewail it, and consider that life which we have left with the same envious eye with which we formerly looked on the garden of happy shades.

³⁸ Seel, 9.

Phaedrus: These groves are haunted by shades eternally miserable....”³⁹

Within the dialogue, Valéry develops a conception of aesthetic experience that operates entirely within the immanence of appearances. Meaningful experience is revealed to be fully contingent upon the finitude of its occurrence, beauty upon its ephemeral transience, and pleasure in an embodied participation in all that passes away rather than in any disembodied reflection of eternity.⁴⁰ As a result, aesthetic experience is understood as a means by which mortal beings become aware, “in a ecstatic manner, of this, their limitedness,” as the very condition for the possibility of meaning. “The ideas and constructions of the artist lead knowledge not out of the phenomenal world but rather into it, in an unforeseeable, novel, and unique manner.” The work of art is revelatory of “a special human freedom,” as “the infinite field of possibilities” that remains open within any ordering of nature or being, not as transcendent but immanent to the meaningful structure of any such order.⁴¹

Heidegger made quite a bit out of this identification of the possibilities of meaning with the finitude of the human condition; moreover, he, along with Adorno, considered the work of art to be a privileged enactment of the paradoxical cementation of meaning to history.⁴² Building upon Nietzsche’s “irregular processuality of the work of

³⁹ As quoted by Seel from Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, or The Architect*, in *Dialogues: The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 4, trans. William Stewart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 65-150, at 80. Bold is my emphasis.

⁴⁰ Wim Wender’s film “Himmel über Berlin,” (1987) makes this same point beautifully.

⁴¹ Seel, 10-11.

⁴² Adorno, of course, filled many pages critiquing Heidegger’s transforming of phenomenological methodology into ontology. In the *Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno claims that Heidegger’s peculiar use of language falls prey to a mythology of the a-historical subject. The emphasis on words such as *Eigenlichkeit* and *Uneigentlichkeit* becoming the jargon of a new politico-religion of primordiality that covers over rather than openly reveals its historical origins. The subtle precision of Adorno’s treatment of Heidegger, along with the striking proximity his own thought bears to Heidegger’s, make summarizing

art,” Heidegger “interprets this occurrence [the artwork’s] as an eminently historical process,” wherein “the emergence and passing away of cultural horizons of meaning takes place.”⁴³ The beholder of art enters into this process of emergent and passing meaning such that they come to experience “all determining knowledge and all instrumental disposability [*Verfügen*] as relying upon presuppositions that cannot be determined conceptually or technologically;” the work of art in the modern world, for Heidegger, “is a display of the *a priori* nondisposability [*Unverfügbarkeit*] of the human situation.”⁴⁴ Of course, with knowledge of this non-disposability comes the attendant awareness of the responsibility the situated human bears toward the care that is the technological ordering of the stuff of the world. The compulsion towards order displayed in Heidegger’s appropriation of the Nietzschean aesthetic experience of disorder makes “the fathomlessness of historical reality ... disclosed by the particular work of art” into its opposite: a historical vacuum incapable of resisting being comprehended as a myth of its own original purity – incapable of resisting the appropriation of its a-conceptual negativity by and into the positive stance necessary for its defense against the onslaught of the conceptual apparatus of history. Adorno’s thought might be said to be an attempt to maintain the negative, in this case, the impenetrability of “historical reality,” at all costs – especially against the defenders of the non-identical (Heidegger) that, inadvertently or not, in defending it, identify it (Being) and thus render its negativity

Adorno’s critique incredibly difficult. That the scholarly address of this difficulty has finally begun is evidenced by the forthcoming collection of critical essays, *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Essays*, eds. Iain MacDonald and Krzysztof Ziarek (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁴³ Seel, 12. The analysis here is based primarily on Heidegger’s “The Origins of the Work of Art” (written in 1935 but not published until 1950) in *Off the Beaten Track [Holzwege, GA5]*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-56.

⁴⁴ Seel, 11-12.

impotent, thereby delivering history over to the violence of the self-consumptive progress of the dialectic of enlightenment.⁴⁵ Heidegger, we might say, made too much, literally, out of the work of art and aesthetic experience.

For Adorno, the articulation of the work of art is “in a permanent state of suspension. As such, it puts up resistance to the petrified living conditions of the present; it tries to bring chaos to a compulsive social order.”⁴⁶ Adorno’s thoughts on the work of art serve to underscore the transgressive potentiality of aesthetic experience. Looking back to Hegel, we are reminded of the artwork’s function being irrevocably tied to its indeterminacy and, to the extent that the work is indeed experienced as art, to the requirement it makes upon its audience of “sensitive interpretation.” Art’s existence is an irritant, not entirely unlike a Socratic gadfly, the work of the artwork remains decisively critical and enigmatically aporetic. What art seeks to evoke is an uncomfortable awareness “that reality is richer than all of the appearances we can fix in the language of conceptual knowledge,” without however directly stating or even suggesting that this is indeed the case. What appears in the artwork’s appearance is, as was stated at the beginning of this excursus, something that does not exist, that, literally, is not to be found in the appearance. The appearance of art puts on display the pregnancy of appearances with possibility:

Artworks become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term – that is, as the appearance of an other – when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of being an act,

⁴⁵ This is one way of expressing the major thesis of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ Seel, 13. To quote Adorno directly: “Theories that argue that art has the responsibility of bringing order – and, indeed, not a classificatory abstract order but one that is sensuously concrete – to the chaotic multiplicity of the appearing or of nature itself, suppress in idealistic fashion the telos of aesthetic spiritualization....” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 93.

even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being something momentary and sudden. This is registered by the feeling of being overwhelmed when faced with an important work. This immanent character of being an act establishes the similarity of all artworks, like that of natural beauty, to music, a similarity once evoked by the term muse.⁴⁷

In comparison to the everyday world of appearances that together are acknowledged, however habitually, to constitute reality, the artwork's appearance "differs radically from all phenomenon that can be apprehended in knowledge and action." The artwork interrupts the ordered sedimentation of appearances with the sudden impact of the ungraspable indeterminacy of the particularity of its own appearance. As a disruption of appearances it momentarily discloses the event of the interpretative transfiguration of the indeterminate into the imagery that is encountered as the appearance of the world. Art relates to the rest of reality as "a religious or hallucinogenic vision in which something is suddenly present and then in the same instant is no longer there."⁴⁸ The articulation of this vision, however, requires a form of aesthetic perception that as a "deliberate *art-oriented*" form of contemplation brings attention to the "spirit" of the painting that "appears through the appearance."⁴⁹ This articulation, the "eloquence" of which is "the force of the kindling of thing and appearance,"⁵⁰ rather than categorizing the existent, "points to the possibility that the non-existent could exist."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 79.

⁴⁸ Seel, 13.

⁴⁹ Seel quoting Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 87. Seel contrasts this type of aesthetic attentiveness to both a "natural" and an "art-remote" stance of appropriation. The former, similar to the "natural attitude" that phenomenology seeks to bracket, sees only the surface composition of color and technique; the latter, is said to direct itself to "merely" the appearance of the artwork, again as object, such that the "excesses of ... painting" go unnoticed by the emphasis on the artwork's "decorative value." Seel, 14.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 80.

⁵¹ Adorno, 132.

If, as Valéry famously claimed, “Beauty demands, perhaps, the slavish imitation of what is indeterminable in things,” a consideration of this indeterminable is granted both theoretical and ethical significance by Adorno. For, as Seel notes, attentiveness to the indeterminate particularity of the sensuously given is tantamount to an attentiveness to ourselves that “makes it possible to experience reality as being richer than everything than can be known about it by means of propositional determination.” Furthermore, “aesthetics lays open a limit to all theoretical world comprehension – a limit to which epistemology... should not close its eyes.”⁵² Similarly, Kierkegaard’s existential aesthetics directs itself toward a consideration of the indeterminate. His is an equally intellectual and aesthetic production that strives to allow the unspeakable particularity of the singular individual’s experience to be, nonetheless, articulated. For Kierkegaard, too, it is by the means of drawing attention in a specific way to aesthetic experience that an awareness of the “indeterminable presence of our lives,” and thus of the possibilities of our freedom, are generated. It is in this way, as we will see, that the answer to the question of what Adorno makes of aesthetic experience is, in large part, answered by a consideration of what he made of Kierkegaard.

⁵² Seel, 17-18.

b: Schönberg

Adorno heard a productivity in Schönberg's dissonance. Within the particularized acoustic image of the a-tonal, he finds a fertility of expressive possibility, nothing less than a newfound experiential knowing, a dialectical shift in self-consciousness. Music becomes a question of itself posed from within the workings of a logic immanent to itself, the self-interrogation of its own validity. Both Schönberg's a-tonality and Adorno's a-conceptuality involve testament to a knowledge other than that derived from the identification of an object of experience with the concept of the subject of experience. They share an adamant refusal of the totalitarian propensities of universal abstraction in favor of an immanent logic of the detail. Out of the expressiveness of discordancy are produced images of the materiality of experience. Following the music, Adorno's philosophical thought begins with the penetration of the detail. An immanent critique into the particular object of experience is the necessary direction of inquiry; otherwise, transcendence is assumed. The facilitation of the stance of a cognitive subject whose ideality indicates separateness predefines the relations adhering between the particular of experience. Such a stance effectively silences the sound of the non-identical.

Appropriated and transformed by Adorno, the motor of dialectical thinking becomes something other than the drive toward a synthetic mediation of the antithetical. His version of the dialectic mirrors his understanding of Schönberg, upon whom he bestowed the title of "dialectical composer." In an early essay titled the same, Adorno states:

This meaning [of the transformative "creative contradiction" of music], however, may be called dialectical. In Schönberg, the contradiction

between strictness and freedom is no longer transcended in the miracle of form. It becomes a force of production; the work does not turn the contradiction toward harmony, but conjures up its image, again and again...⁵³

Creative force erupts out of sustained resistance to the resolution of the dissonant within harmonic comprehension; for Adorno, the ordering structure of the concept is resisted by the force of non-identical thought. Like music, philosophy becomes aware of itself in the form of the question of the validity of its own existence. This awareness is of enclosure within history that simultaneously produces its own rupture – a tear in history, that need not be irrevocably a mourning. Possibility in the image conjured is irreducible to the sensual. An apparition, nonetheless, it is cognitive as well as sensual – an image, as it were, of thought – a *Denkbild*. Benjamin stated that the philosopher shares much distinctively with both the scientist and the artist, although he is irreducible to either. Shared with the scientist is the philosopher’s “interest in the elimination of the merely empirical... by dividing it from within into concepts;” while in common with the artist, the philosopher has “the task of representation;” the sketching of “a restricted image of the world of ideas.”⁵⁴ In that his compositional method becomes a model for a philosophical thinking that strives to the sort of conceptual artistry evoked here, Schönberg receives from Adorno the flattery of imitation.⁵⁵

Schönberg represented a break from traditional music allowing its process of internal fracturing to be heard. Adorno envisions his own philosophical endeavor to be in

⁵³ Theodor Adorno, “The Dialectical Composer,” in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 205.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1988), 32.

⁵⁵ Though it was not well received. Schönberg openly expressed a distaste for Adorno’s intellectualizing of his music.

accordance with the fracture of the discordant; his reworking of conceptuality is, at all times, a reworking of experience. As Nichol森 notes, the experiential dimension of Adorno's work is that with which it is most difficult to grapple, albeit the struggle not being optional. It is produced within and by the material itself. Primarily aesthetic, yet multi-dimensional, the experiential element of dialectical thought as such is invariably difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. To gain an initial perspective on the experiential, it is helpful to continue the explication of Adorno's estimate of the then "new" music of Vienna. Expressing a difference between traditional music (the musical tradition of European culture through Beethoven) and the music of Schönberg, taken from a much later essay, is the following passage:

... traditional music was stamped through and through by the schema of totality; it moved within harmonic, melodic, and formal paths that were pre-drawn by this schema ... as if every musical particular was subordinated to an established generality. By listening appropriately, starting from there, one would be able to deduce the development of its particulars in detail and find one's way with relative ease. Traditional music listened for the listener. This, precisely, is over and done with in Schönberg. The musical context wants to be understood purely from within itself, without lightening the listener's burden by means of an already available system of coordinates within which the particular is nothing but minimal variation.⁵⁶

Adorno's writings make extreme demands on the reader. In order for his thought to be understood at all, the reader must exert himself, and not only in sustaining the intensified concentration of holding steady focus within the conceptual maelstrom of his prose. Like the a-tonal composition, Adorno's thinking of the non-identical requires the reader to make an active contribution to the unfolding of its content. This activity, both

⁵⁶ Adorno, "Toward an Understanding of Schönberg," in *Essays on Music*, 629-630.

imaginative and epistemic, Adorno terms the exact imagination [*exacte Phantasie*].⁵⁷ The configuration of the form of communication his writing takes is not constructed with ease. Within the ineffability of concretion, the threshold of abstraction, lies the source of a wellspring of creative productivity the experience of which is comparable to that of the possibility craved by Kierkegaard's aesthetic young man. Recall that an experiential knowledge of possibility was for Johannes both a source and goal. Within the detail is the ongoing explosion of the absolute.

The activity of the artist, that of the reader too, is misunderstood if taken as the subjective intentions of expression:

In Schönberg we are not dealing with arbitrary behavior or the preferences of a subjective, unfettered artist, the way people once tried to label him as an "Expressionist," for example; nor, equally, are we dealing with the work of a blind craftsman who follows after his material with a calculator, no longer intervening in its spontaneously. Instead, what truly characterizes Schönberg ... is a very exemplary change, both in principle and historically, in the way the composer behaves toward his material. He no longer acts like its creator, nor does he obey its ready-made rules.⁵⁸

Significant features of Adorno's prioritization of the object are illuminated in this passage taken from the early essay "The Dialectical Composer." If the material of philosophy is the conceptual, then how is it that the dialectical thinker could behave, both "in principle and historically," differently in relation to concepts? Behavior is a designation of activity serving to remind one that the philosopher's is not limited to the isolation of reflection.

Not from behind the blinders of a pre-established harmony of quantification, the philosopher practices the craft of composition. Buck-Morris notes that Schönberg's

⁵⁷ NicholSEN's introduction to the work with the same title is helpful in getting some initial insight into the use of the term.

⁵⁸ Adorno, "The Dialectical Composer," 205.

model of the creative process distanced itself from subjective romanticism by replacing the model of the artist as genius with his model of “the artist as craftsman:” “...he saw music not as the expression of subjectivity, but as a search for knowledge which lay outside the artist, as potential within the object, the musical material. For him, composing was discovery and invention through the practice of music-making. Its goal was the knowledge of truth.”⁵⁹ Adorno’s project reformulates phenomenology’s quest for the object in itself. Yet, it is that which constitutes the object as itself that is changed.

⁵⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 123.

c: Benjamin

The role Benjamin's thought played in shaping the peculiarities of Adorno's style could hardly be overstated. It is directly evidenced by his vocabulary: most notable is Adorno's use of the concepts of "truth-value" and "constellation," which were co-opted directly from Benjamin and regularly employed by Adorno throughout the life-span of his work. As we have seen, Kierkegaard scholars have hardly given Adorno's early work on Kierkegaard the opportunity to be understood. The esoteric quality of Adorno's thinking stems, in part, from the influence of Benjamin; thus, an explication of Benjamin's philosophy is necessary. Accordingly, what follows here is a brief sketch of Benjamin's meta-philosophical position as he articulated it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.⁶⁰ If we are to ascertain the following paradoxical truth with which all of Adorno's thought is permeated: "true thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves;"⁶¹ such a preliminary sketch is the prerequisite.

"Epistemo-Critical Prologue" is the title of the first major section of Benjamin's book. In it, he attempts nothing less than the formulation of a novel form of idealism. Tinged with mysticism and characterized by the creative merging of Plato and Kant,

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso Press, 1998). This work was first published in Berlin as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in 1928. In his introduction to the English translation, George Steiner notes that after 1931 this work became "one of a fascinating group of writings and works of art assigned to oblivion by the rise of National Socialism and the consequent dispersal or destruction of the German-Jewish community;" in other words, it became extinct. Only a few copies survived in the hands of Benjamin's friends, Gershon Scholem, Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer and Hannah Arendt. It was not until 1955 that the text again became available to the public in the two-volume edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*. Like Adorno's book on Kierkegaard that it helped to inspire, the *Ursprung* was intended to be Benjamin's *Habilitationschrift*; yet, unlike Adorno's manuscript, Benjamin's was rejected. One of Adorno's closest friends, Walter Benjamin allegedly committed suicide in 1940 in Spain while attempting to flee Nazi persecution. It is only in recent decades that the full breadth and profundity of the work Benjamin left behind has been given its due.

⁶¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 192.

Benjamin's linguistic idealism seeks to articulate the philosophical experience of truth. "It is characteristic of philosophical writing," Benjamin tells us, "that it must continually confront the question of representation."⁶² An attempt to articulate philosophical truth as the task of philosophical writing is tantamount to the attempt to let the representational character of experience speak – that is to say, to represent in writing representation as such. The type of truth that is the concern of philosophy cannot be evoked "*geometrico*," cannot be based on the model of mathematics, which, according to Benjamin considers all "genuine knowledge" to involve "the elimination of the problem of representation [*Darstellungsproblems*]."⁶³ This is not a disparagement of the cognitive value of the quantifiable *per se*, but the construction of a space altogether independent of its demands for objective verification. Benjamin is creating room for the philosopher wherein the pursuit of a distinct form of truth attendant to the representational dilemma of human consciousness is not restricted by the enforcement of the rules of scientific inquiry. Perhaps it would be correct to say that Benjamin takes up as the subject of philosophical inquiry precisely what epistemological inquiry of the 18th and 19th Centuries had come to renounce: the experience of "that area of truth towards which language is directed [*den Bereich der Wahrheit, den die Sprachen meinen*]."⁶⁴ Any inquiry that seeks to make explicit the instability of its own representational codification in language must actively recognize that "the methodological element in philosophical

⁶² Benjamin, 27.

⁶³ Benjamin, 27, 7. (English followed by German editions).

⁶⁴ Benjamin, 27, 7. The possible significance of Benjamin's use of the word *meinen* is here lost in translation. An alternative rendering of the German: "the range of truth signified/meant by language."

projects is not simply part of their didactic form.”⁶⁵ In other words, the truths of philosophy will not be expressible apart from the form of the inquiry that seeks them – as given or discovered in writing, philosophical truth is inseparable from the aesthetic form with which it is presented.

Veritably, philosophical works “possess a certain esoteric quality, which they are unable to discard, forbidden to deny, and which they vaunt at their own peril.”⁶⁶

Benjamin offers two possible forms by means of which philosophical inquiry may take shape: the esoteric essay and the treatise [*Traktate*]. He writes:

If philosophy is to remain true to the law of its own form, as the representation of truth and not as a guide to the acquisition of knowledge, then the exercise [*Übung*] of this form – rather than its anticipation in the system – must be accorded due importance.

To the extent that method is emphasized, Benjamin’s thought is an embodiment of modernism; however, in contrast to efforts at the distillation of a pure methodology yielding a form of objective truth independent of the method used to uncover it, Benjamin makes the decisively impure forms of the essay and the treatise those proper to the activity of philosophical writing.⁶⁷ What is distinct about both of these “methods,” as it were, is that they are defined by their formal aspects; their content is constructed as the *Übung* of their form. Benjamin states that such a method “is essentially representation [*Darstellung ist der Inbegriff inhrer Method*],” the “primary characteristic” of which is “the absence of

⁶⁵ Benjamin, 27, 7.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, 27-28, 7-8.

⁶⁷ While it is somewhat unclear exactly what type of writing Benjamin is referring to with his use of the term treatise, he does not attempt to disguise the term’s religious connotations: “This exercise [i.e., the treatise] has imposed itself upon all those epochs which have recognized the uncircumscribable essentiality of truth in the form of a propaedeutic, which can be designated by the scholastic term treatise because this terms refers, albeit implicitly, to those objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable.” Benjamin, 28.

an uninterrupted purposeful structure.” This absence of pre-figuration allows for “the process of contemplation” to diligently “make new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.”⁶⁸ The irreducible esoteric quality of philosophical writings stems from its “pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object,” from which it receives “both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm.”⁶⁹ The syncopation and atonality of Adorno’s writing attests to his appropriation of this, for lack of a better term, formulation of a technique of philosophical investigation. In his essay on the essay, “The Essay as Form,” he was famously to echo Benjamin’s proposal of this new way of writing philosophy; for, in his words, “the essay does not obey the rules of the game of organized science and theory ... that the order of things is identical with that of ideas.... the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine – deeply rooted since Plato – that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy.”⁷⁰ For Adorno, the essay form holds the promise of nothing less than a signification of “that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.”⁷¹

Let us return to truth, in the philosophical sense, as Benjamin explicates it in the first section of his study of German tragic drama. Buck-Morss comments on this section by framing it within a consideration of Kant. Benjamin is said to approve of Kant “for

⁶⁸ Benjamin 28, 8.

⁶⁹ Benjamin, 28, 8-9.

⁷⁰ Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *The Adorno Reader*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, ed. Brian O’Conner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 98.

⁷¹ Adorno, 99.

being the only philosopher since Plato to concern himself with the justification of knowledge,” while, nonetheless, being highly critical of “the limited nature of Kant’s concept of experience.” Referencing an essay composed about the same time as the *Trauerspiel* study, she notes that Benjamin found Kant’s notion of experience to be religiously and historically blind, and in this regard to be inadequate when “confronted with the transitoriness of the phenomena, on the one hand, and their ... noumenal truth, on the other.”⁷² While this critique is a bit of an overgeneralization, it does serve well to direct attention to the aporetic center of Kantian thought. As Adorno notes elsewhere, due to “the faithfulness with which it [Kant’s philosophy] registered the experience of consciousness,” the Kantian exercise of reason upon itself does not skirt its paradoxical inadequacy fully to account for the ideality inherent to phenomenal experience. Put differently: the Kantian restriction of objective cognition to the empirical, that this prohibition on absolute cognition is itself an absolute claim and hence self-undermining is, from one perspective, not Kant’s mistake so much as the mark of the irreducible paradox of self-consciousness that he struggled to think within rather than conveniently dismiss.⁷³ It is from within such a perspective that Benjamin believes the inadequacies of Kant could be corrected “on the ground of the Kantian system,” and, according to Buck-Morss, such a corrective reading was exactly what he attempted to provide in the first chapter of the *Trauerspiel* book: “in a remarkable inversion of Platonism, Benjamin presented a theory of ‘ideas’ which he

⁷² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 91. The relative paucity of book length commentaries on Adorno and Benjamin’s work might be attributable, in part, to Buck-Morss having set the bar so high so early with this work. It still remains the clearest treatment of these admittedly abstruse thinkers and the most insightful analysis of Adorno’s thought’s complicated relationship with that of Benjamin.

⁷³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 381-382. I believe this to be, in a nutshell, Adorno’s view of Kant.

referred to as constellations that was compatible with Kantian empiricism.”⁷⁴ This theory of ideas has a profound effect on the direction of Adorno’s thinking, which very early he referred to as “the manipulation of conceptual material,” by “grouping and trial arrangement,” by means of “constellation and construction.”⁷⁵ As Buck-Morss notes, while this theory of ideas is markedly abstruse⁷⁶ and while aspects of it are “wedded to a religiomysticism which Adorno never incorporated,”⁷⁷ Benjamin’s formulation of a linguistic idealism cannot be ignored if Adorno is to be understood properly. Let us continue following the direction of her explication of Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* theory of ideas, which she admits to be an “interpretation” open to revision.

Truth is not within the purview of knowledge. For Benjamin, this is a primary postulate of philosophy: “Again and again the statement that the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth [*daß der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis sich nicht deckt mit der Wahrheit*] will prove itself to be one of the profoundest intentions of philosophy in its original form.”⁷⁸ Knowledge as such is never of truth, as “knowledge is open to question [*Erkenntnis ist erfragbar*]” and “is concerned with individual phenomena, but not directly with their unity [*richtet sich auf das Einzelne, auf dessen Einheit aber nicht*

⁷⁴ Buck-Morss, 91.

⁷⁵ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in *The Adorno Reader*, trans. Benjamin Snow, 36.

⁷⁶ As an illustration of just how difficult this text is to read, Buck-Morss footnotes Steiner: “The preliminary ‘*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*’ (an almost untranslatable rubric) is notorious as being one of the most opaque, charged texts in the entirety of European thought.” George Steiner, “The Uncommon Reader,” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 25, 1974, p. 1198. Cited in Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 91, ft. 91.

⁷⁷ The degree to which Adorno’s own thought can be understood to be motivated by an ethical impulse born out of negative theology has recently become a topic of discussion. Regardless, it was indeed Benjamin’s willingness to grant a positive existence to the divine with which Adorno could not concur.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, 30, 10.

unmittelbar].”⁷⁹ Buck-Morss notes that Benjamin makes the distinction between “the Kantian concept of experience as ‘knowledge’ (*Erkenntnis*), the cognitive method of which was adequate for science, and what he called philosophical ‘experience’ (*Erfahrung*), which was concerned with the revelation of truth.”⁸⁰ Benjamin’s theory revolves around this critical distinction. The cognitive form of experience designated with the German *Erkenntnis* refers to the conceptual structures of the subject that serve to constitute the world of knowable objects, in other words, this is the Kantian realm of empirical experience determined by the *a priori* operations of the categories such that, understood properly, will admit of objective validity. The world of *Erkenntnis* is constructed by the subject; “knowledge is possession [*Erkenntnis ist ein Haben*].”⁸¹ Yet, what Benjamin names as truth will not be possessed: “truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas [*dargestellten Ideen*], resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge [*Erkenntnisbereich*].”⁸² Truth, however, is the concern of the philosophical experience named as *Erfahrung*, the task of which is the “representation of ideas [*Darstellung der Ideen*]” out of empirical reality rather than the constitution of that reality out of the subject.⁸³ Perhaps, a brief recapitulation is in order. So far we have seen that Benjamin divides experience into that of the cognitive and philosophical; the former, *Erkenntnis*, comprises the constitution of the world via the operations of the knowing subject’s conceptual structuring of experience; the latter, *Erfahrung*, refers to the

⁷⁹ Benjamin, 30, 10.

⁸⁰ Buck-Morss, 91.

⁸¹ Benjamin, 29, 10.

⁸² Benjamin, 29, 10.

⁸³ Benjamin 34, 15.

representation of ideas, which, according to Buck-Morss, were “determined by the particular phenomena themselves, by the ‘elective affinities’ of their elements ... in Adorno’s language, by their ‘inner logic.’”⁸⁴

By Buck-Morss’ interpretation, concepts play an active role in both *Erkenntnis* and *Erfahrung*, although in distinctive ways. As has been indicated, *Erkenntnis* involves the conceptual operations of the knowing subject in the construction of objectively valid experience. Less clear in Benjamin’s position is the operative role that concepts play in *Erfahrung* “as mediators between the empirically given phenomena and their ideas.”⁸⁵ This is a crucial point, however, as it somewhat attenuates the element of mysticism at work in Benjamin’s understanding of experience. However we choose to characterize Benjamin’s notion of *Erfahrung* it is clear from the following that to consider it as immediate, that is, as conceptually unmediated, would be in error. Benjamin writes:

The phenomena, however, do not enter whole into the realm of the ideas, no in their raw empirical existence, mixed as it is with mere appearance (*Schein*), but they are redeemed alone in their elements.... In this portioning of them, the phenomena stand under concepts. It is the concepts which carry out the unraveling of the phenomena into their elements.⁸⁶

Beginning from the particular phenomena of experience, two lines can be drawn leading, on the one hand, to cognitive knowledge and, on the other, to the philosophical representation of truth. Both of these lines have as their *modus operandi* the concept, for “it was the fate of the phenomena in the hands of the concept, rather than conceptualizing *per se*, which marked the crucial difference between cognitive knowledge and the

⁸⁴ Buck-Morss, 91.

⁸⁵ Buck-Morss, 91.

⁸⁶ Benjamin, 15. As quoted in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 91. This is Buck-Morss’ translation.

philosophical representation of truth.”⁸⁷ The former was achieved by the concept’s ability to subject the particular phenomenon to a process of abstraction whereby “the particular entered into the concept and disappeared.”⁸⁸ In short, the particular is categorized into the general. Within the latter type of experience, the representation of ideas, however, “the particulars, although conceptually mediated, reemerged in the ideas, or more accurately, they *became* the idea in the conceptual arrangement of their elements.”⁸⁹ Here, the experiential phenomena are not independent of the concept; the ideas are not purely a-conceptual; rather, the role of the concept is now that of arranging the particular elements of experience themselves in such way that their configuration is productive of an idea of truth. While the structure of the ideas, that is, the arrangement of the elements, is determined by their “elective affinities,” such a determination is not the equivalent of an ordering of the particulars of experience by type. On the contrary, these affinities connect particulars without hierarchical structure: *Erfahrung* “draws connections between the phenomenal elements,” in a way “not unlike that of the astrologer,” who perceives “figures in the heavens.”⁹⁰

This analysis has now arrived at Benjamin’s analogical concept of the constellation, within which, as he phrases it, “ideas are related to the objects as constellations to the stars [*Die Ideen verhalten sich zu den Dingen wie die Sternbilder zu den Sternen*].”⁹¹ The role of the subject, the stargazer, as it were, in Benjamin’s form of

⁸⁷ Buck-Morss, 92.

⁸⁸ Buck-Morss, 92.

⁸⁹ Buck-Morss, 92.

⁹⁰ Buck-Morss, 92.

idealism is extremely ambiguous. Buck-Morss points this out by noting how Benjamin implies that the ideas are pre-givens, “eternal constellations [*ewige Konstellationen*],”⁹² while, at one and the same time, he holds that the ideas are contingent upon the conceptual activity of the stargazer, whose task is the idea’s construction, “since ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.”⁹³ Not so simply put, the task of the stargazer would be to construct what is already there out of the phenomena as the idea connecting phenomena:

Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences, their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena – or rather their elements ... determines – their relationships to each other. Ideas are [*ewige*] timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements’ being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed.⁹⁴

In order to understand what is intended here with his notion of the idea’s power of redemptive subdivision, it is necessary to look at the importance accorded to language in the Benjaminian conception of the subject, the one who purportedly is assigned this paradoxical task. According to Buck-Morss, Benjamin’s understanding of “concept was virtually synonymous with the name.” The activity of naming was not that of generalization wherein the particular met its death in the conceptual universal necessary

⁹¹ Benjamin, 34, 16. I have modified the translation slightly using “things” for *Dingen* in place of Osborne’s choice of “phenomena.” His choice is odd since Benjamin uses the German *Phänomenen* extensively throughout his discussion of ideas; as a result, it seems safe to assume that when he used *Dingen* his intention was at the least to render a different meaning than *Phänomenen*.

⁹² Benjamin, 34, 16. Here, I am translating *ewige* as “eternal” rather than “timeless” as Osborne has chosen to do.

⁹³ Benjamin, 34, 15.

⁹⁴ Benjamin, 34-35, 16.

for its expression; rather, it “articulated the object’s concrete particularity, and *transformed* the object at the same time by translating it into words.”⁹⁵ It is in this way, that the very existence of the ideas depends upon “their philosophical verbal representation by the subject.”⁹⁶ The conceptualizing activity of the subject allows for the arrangement of the phenomena by providing “the linguistic medium through which their arrangement was transmitted ... so that the relationship between them became visible to the intellect, so that they formed an ‘idea’ which could be mentally perceived.”⁹⁷ For now, let it suffice to say that the ambiguous role of the subject is tied to the way the subject finds herself embedded in language. Of the relation of language to truth Benjamin writes:

Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being ... to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name. This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception, in which words possess their own nobility as names, unimpaired by cognitive meaning.

Thus, we find here a major theme of the larger study within which this current analysis is located; namely, aesthetic experience of the linguistic subject. Benjamin’s “primordial form of perception,” is closely related to Adorno’s notion of “metaphysical experience.”

Benjamin suggests that perceptual experience is structured by its linguistic and historical

⁹⁵ Buck-Morss, 255.

⁹⁶ Buck-Morss, 255. Buck-Morss credits this point to Tiedemann. It is important to note here that Adorno did not share Benjamin’s favorable view of the capacity of language to redeem particularity. It is at this point that Benjamin typically takes recourse to an undialectical positivist mysticism and, from Adorno’s perspective, allows what is perhaps legitimate “metaphysical experience” of the negative to be translated into what it is not, the positive. In the infinite deferral of this tendency, Adorno’s thought remains critical to the end.

⁹⁷ Buck-Morss, 91-92. It is beyond the scope of this present analysis to delve much further into the complicated role language plays in Benjamin’s theory. Its translation by Adorno through his appropriation of Kierkegaard will be treated later in the dissertation. *Cf.* Chapter Three of this work.

codification, and the conjecture that Adorno would, more or less, align himself with such a position is likely to be correct. However, we should have little reason to doubt that Adorno would disagree unequivocally with Benjamin's claim here that that which structures experience can be said positively to precede the experience itself. Such a position all too quickly leads to the positing of an original layer of meaningful experience – and, in turn, to positive claims of authenticity, in other words, to a-historical and thus illusory truth.⁹⁸

Notwithstanding the divergence of Benjamin and Adorno's thinking at the point where the former's turns explicitly theological, the direction of Adorno's philosophy was permanently shaped by the novelty of Benjamin's linguistic idealism. What most impressed Adorno was the dignity Benjamin's method of inquiry accorded to the transitory, the particular and the historical. While it is to some degree correct that "Adorno was less concerned with the fate of the phenomena than he was intrigued by the originality of Benjamin's method and its usefulness for his own program,"⁹⁹ one would be remiss to believe that the historical fate of the phenomenal world was of little concern to him. Adorno only wants to hold out for the survival of the "critical insight that truth is not identical with a timeless *universal*,"¹⁰⁰ against the tendency of rational thought to lead to the positing of universal truth. That Benjamin's approach succumbed to this impulse is inconsequential in comparison to the revolutionary import of his locating of truth in the fragmentary experience of historically embedded particulars. Adorno goes so far as to

⁹⁸ This is exactly what Adorno found dangerous in Heidegger's philosophy.

⁹⁹ Buck-Morss, 92.

¹⁰⁰ Theodor Adorno, "Portrait of Walter Benjamin," *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 231. As quoted by Buck-Morss, 92.

say of Benjamin's programme: "that it is solely the historical which yields the figure of the absolute, became, perhaps without his knowing it, the canon of his practice."¹⁰¹ It is the convergence of Plato and Kant in the constellation of Benjamin's thought that is the mark of the profundity of this practice with which Adorno was so taken. Benjaminian ideas are simultaneously both nothing but empirical phenomena and, as constellations, considerably more than mere phenomena. Buck-Morss states it thus: "For if Platonic ideas were absolute, transcendental forms whose likeness appeared within the empirical objects as a pale reflection of their own eternal truth, Benjamin constructed the absolute from out of the empirical fragments themselves."¹⁰² The absolute, in other words, appears as the image formed when the fragmentary and particular phenomena are arranged into a constellational form or idea – without, and this is the crucial distinction, ceasing to be particular phenomena. This amounts to what Buck-Morss terms an "inversion" of Platonic idealism:

In Plato, the ideas as truth appear in the phenomena. Benjamin's theory was an inversion of Plato: the phenomena appear as truth in the ideas, so that the dignity of the transitory particulars is maintained. More, they are immortalized. Benjamin intended nothing less than their "redemption" (*Rettung*—the word was intentionally religious) by catching their elements up in the structure of an idea as an "eternal constellation."¹⁰³

From the standpoint of a standard reading of the Platonic doctrine of the forms, the appearances comprising empirical phenomena are but imperfect reflections of the ideal form to which they thus owe their existence. The truth of the empirical world is determined by the degree with which the particulars of experience participate in or

¹⁰¹ Adorno, "Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 231. Adorno provides, as an example of Benjamin's particular way of prioritizing the historical, a quote from Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*: "in any case the eternal is more like lace trimmings on a dress than like an idea."

¹⁰² Buck-Morss, 92.

¹⁰³ Buck-Morss, 92.

accurately reflect the ideal realm. A Platonic form is visible only to the mind's eye, yet it may, nonetheless, be said to appear in an empirical phenomenon as truth in this way. In and of themselves, independent of the forms, the fragments composing the empirical world cease to be of any intelligible worth; they might even be thought to cease to exist altogether. Benjamin's inversion of Platonic idealism amounts to the attempt to salvage the worth of empirical particularity as such while simultaneously allowing room for ideality. The veracity of a phenomenon is not found in the consideration of its relative degree of participation in an idealized perfect version of itself, but in its relationship, as it appears, to other phenomena in the configurative arrangement of the idea. Unlike the purity of a Platonic form, Benjamin's ideas, in taking the form of a constellation the constitutive parts of which are the fragments of empirical appearances, are shot through with the historical and social, and thus the truth that they put on display is immanent rather than transcendent – put differently, Benjamin's idealism finds transcendent truth in immanence; his is a “nonmetaphysical metaphysics.”¹⁰⁴ No wonder then, as Buck-Morss notes, that Adorno, as a “metaphysician in an antimetaphysical age,” was so impressed with Benjamin's study of tragedy.¹⁰⁵ Benjamin's thought confronted the metaphysical question of the nature or essence of reality. He did so, however, “without positing a metaphysical realm beyond the historically transient, behind or above physical existence in some noumenal or ideal being;” that is to say, he “read its answer in the empirical elements themselves.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, Benjamin's thought dared to do exactly what

¹⁰⁴ Buck-Morss, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Buck-Morss, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Buck-Morss, 92.

Kant had deemed impossible: “the *phenomenal* realm was made to yield *noumenal* knowledge.”¹⁰⁷

Under the influence of Benjamin’s ambitious project, Adorno formulated his own vision of philosophy in his inaugural speech given at the University of Frankfurt in 1931, “The Actuality of Philosophy.”¹⁰⁸ In short, Adorno adopts the idea of the constellation and makes it his own. Within his appropriation, the construction of constellations becomes an interpretative methodology of philosophical investigation, the task, as it were, of Adorno’s negative dialectics. As a means of concluding this overview of the philosophical import of Benjamin’s thought, let us briefly examine how Adorno configures Benjamin into his own project.¹⁰⁹ Adorno:

In regard to the manipulation of conceptual material by philosophy, I speak purposively of grouping and trial arrangement, of constellation and construction. The historical images, which do not constitute the meaning of being but dissolve and resolve its questions are not simply self-given.... Rather, they must be produced by human beings and are legitimated in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystallizes about them in striking conclusiveness.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Buck-Morss, 92.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in *The Adorno Reader*, 23-39. Snow provides some helpful background information to this essay. It was delivered May 7th, 1931 to the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt where he taught until 1933. The first seminar Adorno taught was on Benjamin’s book and, as would be expected, this speech reflects strongly the influence of Benjamin’s unique thinking. This piece was to be dedicated to Benjamin in its published form, but never saw publication in Adorno’s lifetime. It was found among his writings after his death and appeared for the first time in volume one of his *Gesammelte Schriften* in 1973.

¹⁰⁹ While not to the letter, we are still following the contours of Buck-Morss’ explication of Benjamin’s concept of constellation. She does not, however, mention Adorno’s notion of exact-fantasy in her discussion. It is my contention that our understanding of Benjamin’s influence on Adorno would greatly benefit from a detailed analysis of exact-fantasy in relation to the construction of constellations. Shiery Weber Nicholsen makes some substantial headway in her work *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno’s Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

¹¹⁰ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 36.

Philosophical interpretation is constructive. It cannot record truth without, at the same time, producing it through an interpretive gesture tantamount to the arrangement of its conceptual subject matter. If Benjamin's thought redeemed the value of empirical particularity and thus opened the door to an analysis of cultural objects, the objects under analysis for philosophy proper are concepts. They, too, are shot through with the historical and reveal themselves to be so when their truth is sought in their configural relation to other concepts forming altogether a constellation. Arranging the conceptual entities of philosophy into constellations is the productive task of the dialectical philosopher, not the uncovering or discovering of absolute truth: "the task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret the unintentional reality ... by the power of constructing figures, images."¹¹¹ The dialectical philosopher arranges concepts such that they become images; his task is as aesthetic, then, as it is intellectual, as creative as it is analytic.¹¹² The practice of an aesthetic form of reason Adorno names as that of exact fantasy:

An exact fantasy; fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangements ... a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question.¹¹³

That the imagination is involved in the exercise of the intellect, in the construction of constellations, is not indicative of the ability of philosophy to take up as its subject matter anything the imagination can produce. For Adorno, philosophy is certainly not the

¹¹¹ Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 32.

¹¹² G.W.F. Hegel, "The Earliest System – Programme of German Idealism," in *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998), 28-9.

¹¹³ Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," 37.

writing of fairytales. As an immanent practice, philosophical interpretation remains in dialogical relationship to the history of ideas. Perhaps the belief that philosophy could somehow sever itself from its past was the folly of the positivism that dominated English language philosophy in the 20th Century. Dialectical philosophy, for Adorno, does not invent its subject matter, but it does interpret its subject matter through the way it is arranged and the models such arrangements come to produce. These models are akin to constellations. What we find in his study of Kierkegaard is Adorno's application of this methodology to Kierkegaard's texts. The aesthetic dimension of Kierkegaard's work that he presents to us is, as its title indicates, a construction; it is, that is, a constellation.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Yet, the image that Adorno constructs of Kierkegaard is itself constructed out of the images with which Kierkegaard constructs his own thought. The constellatory model fits Kierkegaard's corpus quite well; his work, as a whole, can be seen to be one large constellation where each point in the figure is comprised by one of the various pseudonyms. The truth conveyed, in effect, is in the thought-image thereby constructed. This is no passing point, but, for now, I must let it pass.

ii: Adorno's Thought-Image of Kierkegaard

Thought-images (*Denkbilder*) are not images like the Platonic myths of the cave or the chariot. Rather, they are scribbled picture-puzzles, parabolic evocations of something that cannot be said in words (*des in Worten Unsagbaren*). They do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving ... to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire (Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*).¹¹⁵

Commenting on the thought-imagery of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, Adorno uses the imagery of illumination to convey his point. He is compelled to use imagery to convey his point – the image is illuminative – that this point is other than Plato's is telling. No longer able to bask comfortably in the mythological rays of the Platonic sun, perhaps more from an awareness of their impotence than from fear of being burned, the operation of the critical intellect becomes an aesthetic construction. In contrast with the sun's constancy, the light from the electrical spark of the enigmatic is momentary, erratic, unpredictable and dangerous; yet, its illuminative potency, the intensity of its light, is capable of the conflagration of stagnant and complacent thinking. A productive form of disruption appears to be the goal of the type of writing that is the *Denkbilder's* construction. The product is a heightened awareness of the constructive role played by the aesthetic in the everyday world of experience it disrupts. We become aware of the reality of appearances through becoming aware of the active role we play in the images of appearance. Adorno's first published work, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, displays Kierkegaard's thought as an elaborate conceptual edifice of

¹¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 323.

fragmented imagery the constitutive parts of which are just such images of thought. These “parabolic evocations” of the non-conceptual, when taken together, trace a figuration of Kierkegaard as a master writer of *Denkbilder*.

The analysis to follow seeks to trace out the lines of this figuration by first offering a working definition of the *Denkbild* gathered from Gerhard Richter’s recent work *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writer’s Reflections from Damaged Life*. Then, following Adorno, the analysis will offer several specific passages of Kierkegaard’s writing as examples of thought-images. These examples will be shown to suggest the tension of subjective idealism that pervades Kierkegaard’s thinking, and perhaps also that of the critical philosophy of Adorno. Drawing on commentary from both Kierkegaard and Adorno on the irreducibility of the aesthetic dimension of communication, the final section will show how the construction of a thought-image is incomplete absent the reader’s contributory role of an imaginative form of contemplation. This analysis will conclude by contending that we have a way of conceiving and discussing the experimental and pedagogical dimension of Adorno’s thought through understanding the imaginative participation of the reader in the construction of an image. As Richter suggests, the *Denkbild* may hold possibilities for political and social transformation that have, as of yet, hardly been explored.

According to Adorno, the content of philosophical thought is irrevocably tied to the form of its presentation. While the parataxical style of his own writings puts this insight on display through its performance, he occasionally provides direct commentary on this peculiar importance he accords to the style of his own thought. Among such privileged pieces of writing, the most well known is perhaps his essay on the essay

entitled “The Essay as Form.”¹¹⁶ There, in explicit distinction from Descartes’ four rules for the implementation of a clear and distinct method for the acquisition of knowledge, Adorno offers the essay as a model of philosophical writing that suspends the very concept of methodology. Instead of through method, within the essay form “thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter ... freely associat[ing] what can be found associated in the freely chosen object [of inquiry].”¹¹⁷ If philosophy is to provide an account of experience, while avoiding the snare of positivism’s dismissal of everything it deems subjective, it must take up an unmethodical approach of having its form determined, not pre-determined, by the material into which it inquires. Positivistic claims to objectivity mask the object’s pre-determinations by means of the assumed standpoint of a non-existent and detached subject; yet, for Adorno it is through the active prioritization of inquiry’s object that the philosophical thought of a subject has a future.¹¹⁸ Given that the subject matter, the object, as it were, of philosophical reflection is first and foremost the fragmentary and incomplete realm of experience as undergone by a subject, in order for such reflection to become actual, it must be an active and creative force of interpretation the reflective content of which takes shape as aesthetic form. As stated in *Negative Dialectics*, “the presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *The Adorno Reader*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Brian O’Conner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 91-111.

¹¹⁷ Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 99.

¹¹⁸ The following passage, taken from another essay, “Subject and Object,” illustrates this point: “Potentially, even if not actually, objectivity can be conceived without a subject; not so subjectivity without an object. No matter how we define the subject, some entity cannot be juggled out of it.” *The Adorno Reader*, trans. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, 142-143.

¹¹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 18.

Adorno declares: “The aesthetic moment is thus not accidental to philosophy.”¹²⁰ As experienced, the reflective and the sensual and then the intellectual and the aesthetic are not so readily distinguished. For philosophy, their experiential co-implication finds its expression within the creative force of the dialectical movement of speculative thought. While this is undeniably a Hegelian proposition, it is only *via* Kierkegaard’s internal disruption of this dialectic that this intertwining was extended so that the heights of the abstractions of idealization were expressly interwoven with the concretions of *sensual* desire. To use Adorno’s phraseology, we could say that Kierkegaard was the first to subject the synthetic force of identity to the jolting disruption of the non-identical, that Kierkegaard was, in this way, the first practitioner of a negative dialectics. That it is with his attempt to think particularity, the particular individuated consciousness of self, that dialectical thought first becomes critical remains so, notwithstanding Adorno’s claims that: “attempts like Kierkegaard’s ... end up in the sacrifice of the individual and in the same abstraction that he denounced in the systems of idealism.”¹²¹ Most importantly, the truth-content of Kierkegaard’s writings cannot be severed from the elaborate pseudonymous literary form with which it is delivered. Any attempt to do so would be to make the necessarily indirect communication of subjective particularity assume a direct form and thus render it as something it is not. It would be to relieve the individual readers of the contributory role they play in the construction of the text, an attempt to read for the readers analogous to the way, for Adorno, that modern popular music listens for the listeners. It would be an attempt to communicate a result while

¹²⁰ Adorno, 64.

¹²¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 154.

foregoing the process, while as Kierkegaard writes: “The communication of results is an unnatural form of intercourse [Danish]... in so far as every man is a spiritual being, for whom **the truth consists in nothing else than the self-activity of personal appropriation**, which the communication of a result tends to prevent.”¹²² While the influence of Benjamin, Marx, and Schoenberg have been well documented, the influence of Kierkegaard on Adorno has not. We might find this odd given Kierkegaard’s implementation of an indirect and transgressive philosophical writing that directly involves the appropriative activity of its readers in its construction, the form and content of which are not severed with ease.

Within the conceptual work of philosophy there resides an irreducible aesthetic dimension. With the paleonomical use of the term *Denkbild*, Richter’s recent work endeavors to name the aesthetic dimension of conceptual thought. The production of thought-images, equally understood as both “conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual,” he attributes to certain members, loosely interpreted, of the Frankfurt school – namely, Benjamin, Bloch, Adorno and Kracauer.¹²³ While the terse style of writing employed by Benjamin in his epigrammatic *One Way Street* may exemplify the *Denkbilder*, understood as “brief, aphoristic prose text[s] typically ranging in length between a few sentences and a couple of pages that both illuminates and explodes the conventional distinctions among literature, philosophy,

¹²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 216-217.

¹²³ Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

journalistic intervention and cultural critique,”¹²⁴ Richter’s deployment of the term is multi-faceted and, in his words, “should be understood not simply as a prefabricated concept and fixed genre, ready for us to initialize, but as the formal site for singular and unpredictable – but not arbitrary or facile – acts of conceptual creation.”¹²⁵ If it can be discussed as a genre at all, which not incidentally is exactly what Richter is proposing, it is the “genre-without-a-genre par excellence ... the genre that both lacks a genre and relies on the genreless for its affirmation as a genre.”¹²⁶ As a type of thought or style of writing, the thought-image can only be articulated as the site of the resistance to the closure of thought both presupposed and enacted by such categorization. The construction of *Denkbilder* is fairly considered as a “liminal form of discourse, a minor form of writing, and a marginal textual practice;” moreover, “the theoretical content [of the *Denkbild* is to be] performed – rather than merely described by the logical and formal categories of philosophy.”¹²⁷ In short, the often neglected aesthetic dimension attending conceptual thought is, by the writer or thinker of the thought-image, made explicit by drawing attention to itself, “self-consciously expos[ing] the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative – rather than glossing over this tension in an effort to create the false semblance of disembodied meaning.”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Richter, 7.

¹²⁵ Richter, 18.

¹²⁶ Richter, 21.

¹²⁷ Richter, 16.

¹²⁸All philosophical claims to universality are tied for their expression to the particularities of language. The inescapability of this linguistic moment makes of any truth that can be articulated a fragment. The longer passage from which this quote is extracted illustrates this point: “...the relation between the literary and the theoretical shows how the reality of a concept always and of necessity is based in a singular linguistic moment, a trope whose materiality of signification it never fully can shuck. Because there can be no theoretical concept that is free from the (unreliable) singularity of the particular shape that it necessarily

The *Denkbilder* cannot be defined without distortion – perhaps it would be correct to state that the evidential presentation of the “fragmentary, explosive, and decentering force”¹²⁹ of the aesthetic dimension of experience is precisely what the *Denkbild* aims to convey by putting on display a failure to communicate the particularity of the aesthetic. Richter suggests that it is within the “communication of non-communicability”¹³⁰ that its unique productivity is found. He writes:

The Denkbild therefore works to create an image (*Bild*) in words of the ways in which it says what cannot be said. It is a snapshot of the impossibility of its own rhetorical gestures. What it gives us to think (*denken*) is precisely the ways in which it delivers an image (*Bild*) not only of this or that particular content, but always also of its own folding back upon itself, its most successful failure.¹³¹

What the aesthetic display of failure succeeds in communicating in this case is possibility, that is, the unformed as such, the un-thought as such, and therefore the possibility of a holding out for a futural not-yet, that non-conceptual substantiality that is Adornonian hope. This should remind us of Kierkegaard’s thematic development of immediate sensuality as a reflective principle and the paradox that the most abstract is tantamount to the greatest concretion.¹³² The communication of incommunicability parallels Kierkegaard’s development of the necessity of an indirect form of communication. For, in his words, “a communication in the form of a possibility

assumes upon entering language, literature, such as the Denkbild, self-consciously exposes the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative—rather than glossing over this tension in an effort to create the false semblance of disembodied meaning.” Richter, 25.

¹²⁹ Richter, 8.

¹³⁰ Richter, 9.

¹³¹ Richter, 13.

¹³² The primary subject of analysis of the first chapter of this work.

compels the recipient to face the problem of existing in it, so far as this is possible.”¹³³

Let us take the communication of possibility as our tentative understanding of the communicative goal of the conceptually charged aesthetic writing under consideration here. Let it also suffice, for now, to say that such communication is undergone by an individual as an experiential contact with the enigmatic notion of indeterminacy. One might note the strong parallel that begins to emerge here between Kierkegaard’s thematic development of existence-communication and certain aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic theory. For example, according to Shierry Weber Nicholzen, “for Adorno enigma marked the point of continuity and discontinuity between the subject’s experience of the [art] work and its non-conceptual or mimetic aspect.”¹³⁴ But, this is getting a bit ahead of ourselves, as everything that has been said thus far in regard to the thought-image, its resistance to classification, the productivity of its negativity, its potential goal of conveying possibility as such, has not resulted in the acquisition of a workable definition.

Richter contends that, underneath the diversity of approaches and positions found in the works of Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch and others there is their union in a principle guiding assumption: namely, that “*what* they say cannot be thought in isolation from *how* they say it, that any philosophical truth-content their writing may contain invariably is tied to, and mediated by, its specific and potentially unstable figures of presentation.”¹³⁵ Broadly put, a *Denkbild* is, thus, a form of critical thought the philosophical truth-content of which is tied to and mediated by its figures of presentation. By this criterion, it is apparent that Frankfurt School scholars would potentially benefit from including the

¹³³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 320.

¹³⁴ Shierry Weber Nicholzen, 154.

¹³⁵ Richter, 2.

melancholy Dane among the pantheon of their most influential predecessors; likewise, approaching members of the Frankfurt school, particularly Adorno, as beneficiaries of Kierkegaard's legacy might be a particularly instructive endeavor for the Kierkegaardian scholar. For, if it is putting on display the irreducibility of the figurative dimension of thought by which the writers of the thought-image are unified, standing, as it does, in contrast to the figurative denial characteristic of modern philosophy's attempt to systematize the absolute, the aesthetic productions of Kierkegaard's philosophy are certainly among the greatest attempts to convey a typology of truth that does not exist apart from the form of, even the activity of, its conveyance. Consequently, there should be little reason to scratch our heads over Adorno's choice of Kierkegaard as subject matter of his early work, instead, given the existential-theological disposition of this subject matter, it could indeed be instructive for us to consider it more closely. It is in large part from his close reading of Kierkegaard that Adorno learned the magnitude of the relationship between the presentational form of philosophical thought and the determination of its content. This is not the only lesson he learned from Kierkegaard. Adorno's refusal to halt at the paradox, to shy away from the subterranean threat simultaneously expressed and hidden by any expressed thought and posed to his own thinking by the acknowledgment that it is only by the force of the identical that identity thinking could be subjected to the critique of the non-identical, was no doubt inspired by Kierkegaard's passionately committed subjective thinker who "has the absolute disjunction ready to hand ... he holds it fast with a thinker's passion, but he holds it as a

last decisive resort, to prevent everything from being reduced to merely quantitative differences.”¹³⁶

In his inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, given in 1931, a time-period when he would have been actively working on the Kierkegaard manuscript, and entitled “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno writes:

...philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretatively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings.¹³⁷

And, a few turns of thought later, writes:

The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images (*Bilder*), out of the isolated elements of reality it negates (*aufhebt*) questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science.¹³⁸

Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic fulfills these proscriptions for the practice of an interpretative form of philosophy that proceeds by an aesthetic production of the conceptual that as “true interpretation succeeds through a juxtaposition of the smallest [unintentional] elements.”¹³⁹ In a distinctive appropriation of Benjamin’s allocation to philosophy the task of the representational presentation of ideals, rather than the conceptual deduction of the quantitatively real, Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard aims to give expression to the force of non-conceptuality ever at work in Kierkegaard’s writings, of a non-conceptual truth rather than the deductive knowledge of the conceptual. He

¹³⁶ Kierkegaard, 313.

¹³⁷ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in *The Adorno Reader*, 31.

¹³⁸ Adorno, 32.

¹³⁹ Adorno, 32.

does not seek to explicate it conceptually but represent it mimetically – to make its form of presentation, its aesthetic operations, an extenuation of the effects of Kierkegaard’s own figurative model of writing. The force behind such a construction is none other than that of the aesthetic as explicated and presented by Kierkegaard. Adorno’s study produces an aesthetic image of Kierkegaard, and, in doing so, seeks to provide a representation of Kierkegaard that maintains fidelity to the resistance his writing holds out against the totalizing comprehension of system. The interpretative analysis provides an exemplary model of an astrological methodology; the constructed image of Kierkegaard is a mosaic that coheres in a way analogous to that of the constellation – the arrangement of the points of “the most minute details of subject matter,”¹⁴⁰ the particulars of which Adorno’s analysis extends far and wide over Kierkegaard’s *corpus* to provide, each as a “microcosm of the whole,”¹⁴¹ come together as the figuration of a form of truth that, like the real yet ideal imagery of a constellation, is contingent upon not only the arrangement of the stars but equally upon the formative activity of the star-gazer, understood here best as a form of perceptual apprehension indistinguishable from reflective contemplation. The particulars out of which an image of the aesthetic is constructed, are, in this case, themselves particular images, the specific and peculiar linguistically produced imagery that populate Kierkegaard’s writings. Adorno transfers passages of Kierkegaard’s writings into his own, whole and intact, scarcely differentiated from his own words, many of these passages are of such substance that even the most

¹⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osbourne (London: Verso, 2003), 30. Benjamin’s statement of an esoteric form of Platonic idealism in this rejected *habilitation*.

¹⁴¹ Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Critique of the Organic*, here taken from the foreword to his translation of Adorno’s *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, xiv. This essay can also be found in Hullot-Kentor’s *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 77-93.

attentive of reader is likely to confound the proprietary issue. Hence, the thought-image of Kierkegaard is constructed from his own imagery, which is not far from saying that the primary constituent of Kierkegaard's aesthetic is the thought-image. It is in this light that Adorno paints Kierkegaard's portrait with language.

While the construction of Kierkegaard's aesthetic, as itself an image presented to the reader, has as its building blocks Kierkegaard's own words, the arrangement of the material in such a way that Kierkegaard as thought-image presents himself in the different light of insight is the architectonic work of the aesthetic philosopher. Adorno's insight is incisively critical. Notwithstanding its productive recuperation and redeployment of Kierkegaard's aesthetic, Adorno's critique is productive, rather than dismissive criticism that cuts at the throat of Kierkegaard's existential project. Understood as the proposed antiserum to the noxious effects of idealism, including the numbing effect upon the particular individual's sense of freedom, Adorno's appropriative critique attempts to articulate how the philosophy of existence stands at the very apex of the cumulative tendency of idealism to equate the abstract with the real. It is within thought-images that Kierkegaard presents his notion of inwardness and Adorno locates the fodder for his critical analysis; yet, as we will see, it is out of these same images that he finds the truth-content of Kierkegaard's philosophy to reside in its failure to fully liberate itself from the realm of semblance, to be inseparable, that is, from the fragmented form of its presentation. About the following passage, taken from the writings of the aesthetically-minded pen of the pseudonymous author of the first half of *Either/Or*, Adorno claims it to be "a definition of the aesthetic, itself pictorial and certainly the most precise that Kierkegaard gave:"

Sorrow is my feudal castle. It is built like an eagle's nest upon the peak of a mountain lost in the clouds. No one can take it by storm. From this abode I dart down into the world of reality to seize my prey; but I do not remain down there, I bear my quarry aloft to my stronghold. My booty is images that I weave into the tapestries of my palace. There I live like one of the dead. I immerse everything I have experienced in a baptism of forgetfulness, consecrating it to an eternal remembrance. Everything temporal and contingent is cast-off and forgotten. Then I sit, an old man, grey-haired and thoughtful, and explain picture after picture in a voice as soft as a whisper; and at my side a child sits and listens, although he long knows everything I have to say.¹⁴²

Here we find an illustration of the “image composed in words” that “arrest[s] thought” found in abundance throughout Kierkegaard’s writings and put to use by Adorno as the individuated pieces out of which an aesthetic representation of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic is constructed. A refusal to turn away from the resistance to communicability of the textual apparition involves the cognitive activity as well as the perceptual receptivity of the reader – involves what Adorno will later name as the “exact imagination.” This passage successfully conjures an otherworldly form of ideality, as thought-image, as it turns its own imagery in upon itself. The last few lines seal the enigmatic by twisting the romantic imagery of the knight’s palace of aesthetic seduction unexpectedly into that of elderly man and child, perhaps father and son, in an imaginary form of contemplation before the images the poetic knight, as the father, has produced. The material inscription of the aesthetic ideal in the representational figuration of the image has as the content of its expression, the resistance it offers to the father’s attempt at its explanation. Reflective knowledge of the image is tied irrevocably to the abstractions of language, to the annihilation of the particular in its being named within a classificatory structure of abstract, conceptual identification. Yet, while a lifetime of dwelling within the edifice of

¹⁴² Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 64-65.

comprehensibility that is language may lead to there being a lot to be said about each image, the old man here is aware that within the child's pre-reflective grasp of each image there is contained a knowledge that encompasses, perhaps even surpasses, that of his own. Echoing the seducer's declaration from *Either/Or* that, insofar as he has "any educative influence" on the girl he seduces, it is only "by teaching her again and again what... [he] has learned from her;"¹⁴³ the father, who forms a reflection for the son of himself as not yet, gives the son, who is for the father reflective of himself as both death and hope,¹⁴⁴ back a reflexive knowledge of himself as the failure of comprehension that is the "multi-tongued" reflection of speculative comprehension—for Kierkegaard, the type of reflexive awareness specific to the aesthetic realm. The point of indeterminacy in the thought-image is the marker for what Richter terms "the negative presence of the infinite in the formal aesthetic features of its very finitude."¹⁴⁵

Adorno finds the section of aphoristic refrains in *Either/Or* entitled "*Diapsalmata*," the section containing the passage above, to be among the clearest expressions of Kierkegaard's productive insight into the disruptive critical force of the aesthetic; as he states, here Kierkegaard's writing "legitimizes itself as a work of exact

¹⁴³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1992), 327.

¹⁴⁴ The mirroring relation between father and son is a common image deployed by Kierkegaard in the construction of his thought-images. For example, Adorno quotes from Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*: "There was once a father and a son. A son is like a mirror image in which the father beholds himself, and for the son the father too is like a mirror in which he beholds himself as he will someday be. However, they rarely regarded one another in this way, for their daily intercourse was characterized by the cheerfulness of gay and lively conversation. It happened only a few times that the father came to a stop, stood before the son with a sorrowful countenance, looked at him steadily and said: 'Poor child, you live in silent despair.'" Adorno, 72.

¹⁴⁵ Richter, 17.

fantasy.”¹⁴⁶ The productivity of Adorno’s analysis, however, proceeds from the subjection of such passages as these to his dialectically subversive form of negative criticism. Hence, it is when Kierkegaard’s writing is at its most epigrammatic (and thus most disruptive of any idealistic stance that posits the mind as the ground of the real) that it is revelatory of itself as the expression of contradiction. It is an attempted escape from the entrapments of idealism that is, at one and the same time, an expression of idealism in its most abstract form. Kierkegaard’s thought expressively embodies this paradox. It puts on display the failure of thought to determine its own conditionality, of the subject to posit its own ground of meaning, to remove itself from the relational awareness it bears to a transcendence it cannot postulate as knowledge nor have knowledge of itself without. It is essential that such an attempt be in earnest, if, that is, it is to be successful in engendering the intellectual/aesthetic experience of possibility that its own failure delivers indirectly. Adorno’s words to this effect are noteworthy:

He [Kierkegaard] becomes a critic of the system because consciousness, as consciousness of an existence that is not deducible from itself, establishes itself as the ultimate contradiction of his idealism. From the totality of consciousness ... his thought returns to this one point in order to gain the single category that will break the power of the system and restore ontology. The point that he seizes, his own fulcrum, is the archimedean point of systematic idealism itself: the prerogative of thought, as its own law, to found reality.¹⁴⁷

As is Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard’s critical reading of Hegel takes place as a form of immanent criticism. Much of its existential composition is driven by the same force of ideality at work within the subjective idealism that was, during Kierkegaard’s life, the philosophical position dominating the intellectual and cultural

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 137.

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, 107.

climate of Copenhagen and Berlin. Although it may not be incorrect to present Kierkegaard as a thinker standing against the abstractions of systematic idealism, such an oversimplified sketch misleads, if, that is, it leads us to believe that Kierkegaard posits that thought of thought's limits, even that of the anti-systematic, could take place from anywhere except within the system it constitutes by its own operations. Kierkegaard seizes the reigns of Hegel's systematic idealism from within when he makes his leap into inwardness and, by steering the dialectic into the direction of its fulfillment, attempts to think the source of the drive toward abstract comprehension as a particular concretized instantiation of its own occurrence, as the concrete existence of self-awareness, as an opening in the closure of totality that appears in the world as the existence of an individual human being. The thought of existence, however, could only ever be one of its own impossibility. Kierkegaard's existence concept, which was developed to escape the abstractions of idealism, ends up expressing the formless power of the conceptual; that is, it will admit of no predication and thus becomes itself an empty concept. When approached conceptually, there is nothing that can be said in support of the existence of existence as such. Within the Kierkegaardian dialectic, consciousness comes to sacrifice itself on the altar of its own incomprehensibility. Adorno writes:

For Kierkegaard, consciousness must have pulled itself free from all external being by a movement of 'infinite resignation;' through choice and decisiveness, it must have freely posited every content in order finally, in the face of the semblance of its own omnipotence, to surrender its omnipotence and, foundering, to purify itself in having supposed itself autonomous.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Adorno, 107. It is difficult to maintain that Kierkegaard anywhere claimed to succeed in thinking existence against idealism; indeed, it is only through the mouthpiece of his ethical pseudonym, Judge Wilhelm, most notably the author of the second half of *Either/Or*, the half standing in contrast to the explicitly aesthetic writings of the first. Judge Wilhelm's essays read as if they were classical statements of 20th century existentialism, especially that spawned from Heidegger's prioritization of the self ownership of one's own-most possibilities, the authentic as *Eigenlichkeit*. The transparency of a self-reconciliation with

On the one hand, Kierkegaard's philosophy of the isolated interiority of subjective experience represents the apex of modern idealism. In the face of a society laying siege to the individuation of experience, the idealist drive in Kierkegaard's thought takes flight into itself. In attempting to free itself from the materiality of its origins, that is, from the historical and social conditions which are the very conditions of its own possibility, Adorno shows us how Kierkegaardian subjectivity, inadvertently, yet inevitably, drags the world into its supposedly empty castle of imaginary resignation. The castle is revealed to be a mere house of cards. On the other hand, as a failed attempt of thought to think itself out of its own conditions – should we add that it is a beautiful failure – it puts on display the inability of thought to provide an adequate account of itself as the particular “individuation of knowledge”¹⁴⁹ it experiences itself to be. To the extent that it succeeds in this failure, Kierkegaard's writings can be said to establish contact and convey an indeterminate force analogous to Adorno's notion of the non-identical. Before explicating the presence of the non-identical in the “self-consciousness of its mythical semblance” that in its “aesthetic characteristics” comes close to “reality,”¹⁵⁰ Adorno examines how Kierkegaard's “estrangement from the world leads to un-dialectical stances on internal relations, between subject and object, internal and external history, history and nature.”¹⁵¹ He discusses Kierkegaard's notion of inwardness as it is portrayed in the descriptive images of the interior the 19th century bourgeois apartment that

one's own freedom is, for Kierkegaard's mouthpiece of the ethical, merely the matter of a choice—precisely the often repeated existential choice of choice itself as the concretion of the self.

¹⁴⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 47.

¹⁵⁰ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 66.

¹⁵¹ David Sherman, “Adorno's Kierkegaardian debt,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27 (2001): 77-106.

populate the pages of Kierkegaard's early work.¹⁵² These descriptions, according to Adorno, are betrayals of the ideological operations that support the position wherein "active subjectivity for Kierkegaard is the bearer of all reality."¹⁵³ Kierkegaard's strategy of undermining the "familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer,"¹⁵⁴ the position he associates with systematic idealism, his turning inward is an attempt to omit the outer world altogether in favor of an inner experience, itself altogether independent from both its outward appearances and determination, Adorno presents as a historical image attempting to escape history. Instead, such images drag concrete social reality into themselves, revealing not just that consciousness of inwardness is one that occupies a position of privilege, but also that the privileged awareness of the self's particularity allows for its entrapment within the universal to reveal itself as the sacrifice it must make to its own comprehensibility. Let us take a look at a few textual examples.

Johannes, the pseudonymous author of the "Diary of a Seducer," often reflects on the lived-space, the material setting and atmosphere within which his planned seduction of Cordelia unfolds. Adorno states that the following description of Cordelia's Aunt's parlor may be the "key" of Kierkegaard's entire body of work:¹⁵⁵

However old I may become, it will always be impossible for me to think of Cordelia amid surroundings different from this little room. When I come to visit her, the maid admits me to the hall; Cordelia herself comes in from her room, and, just as I open the door to enter

¹⁵² "Images of interiors are at the center of the early Kierkegaard's philosophical constructions." Adorno, 41.

¹⁵³ Adorno, 27.

¹⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Adorno, 42.

the living room, she opens her door, so that our eyes meet in the doorway. The living room is small, comfortable, little more than a cabinet. Although I have now seen it from many different viewpoints, the one dearest to me is the view from the sofa. She sits there by my side; in front of us stands a round tea table, over which is draped a rich tablecloth.

Johannes continues with a description of the mood of the material objects in the room:

On the table stands a lamp shaped like a flower, which shoots up vigorously to bear its crown, over which a delicately cut paper shade hangs down so lightly that it is never still. The form of the lamp reminds one of oriental lands, the movement of the shade of the mild oriental breezes. The floor is concealed by a carpet woven from a certain kind of osier, which immediately betrays its foreign origin. For the moment I let the lamp become the keynote of my landscape. I am sitting there with her outstretched on the ground, under this wonderful flower. At other times I let the osier rug evoke ideas about a ship, about an officer's cabin—we sail out into the middle of the great ocean... Cordelia's environment must have no foreground, but only the infinite boldness of far horizons.¹⁵⁶

Johannes is representative of the skillful appropriation of aesthetics by the “erotologist”¹⁵⁷ who, being well versed in the power of semblance, has learned how to arrange the particulars of a setting such that the resulting image serves his furtive purposes of enchantment.¹⁵⁸ The image of enchantment here is that of a romantic ideality entirely unbound to the finite conditions of its occurrence. The empty space of interiority he intends to construct, the flight into an object-less interiority, never moves away from its point of departure, those material objects of its foreground that subjectivity would like to view as “mere occasions”¹⁵⁹ for the reflective activity of an independent subject, if not, the creations of an imaginary mode of its reflection. The occupant of Kierkegaard's

¹⁵⁶ Adorno, 43.

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin names Kierkegaard's aesthetic philosophy to be an erotology in the *PassagenWerk*.

¹⁵⁸ He arranges the setting of their final meeting.

¹⁵⁹ Adorno, 29.

intérior does not view the material objects of experience as its constitutive parts; to the contrary, inwardness conceives of itself as an “objectless interior vis-à-vis space.”¹⁶⁰ The objects form the boundaries of an interiority that sets itself off from them by experiencing itself as the bestower of the object’s meanings – another way of saying that the world of objects exists as equipment for the subject and obscuring the possibility that the subject, to some extent, arises from the needs of the material objects of its socio-historical context.¹⁶¹

Adorno writes: “In Kierkegaard’s “situation,” historical actuality appears as reflection. Indeed it appears re-flected, literally thrown-back. The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself ... the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediately, in subjectivity.”¹⁶² If the external world is subordinated to the fantastical whims of an internal subject, this interior space, nonetheless, maintains a dialectical relation to that which it excludes. The written images produced as a result are said by Adorno to “point beyond this stratum by the strength of the things they record.”¹⁶³ Cordelia’s living room, although filled with objects, lacks concretion; as Buck-Morss states it, “the objects inside the *intérieure* ... are reduced to mere appearance, without concrete content ... filled with the foreign imports of an imperialist economy [the room

¹⁶⁰ Adorno, 43.

¹⁶¹ Adorno’s relationship to Heidegger’s thought is extremely complex. There is certainly truth in the claim that Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard is an attempt to read him otherwise and against Heidegger’s appropriation of Kierkegaard – and the type of existentialism that took root and spread from here. Susan Buck-Morss briefly, although astutely, notes the parallel between Heidegger’s notion of world as equipment or tool and Kierkegaard’s abstract formulation of subjectivity. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 120-121.

¹⁶² Adorno, 40.

¹⁶³ Adorno, 41.

is] an ornamental, decorative arrangement.”¹⁶⁴ They receive their meaning “... not from the substance out of which they are manufactured, but out of the *intérieur*, which assembles the illusion of the things as a still-life. Here the forfeited objects are conjured up in an image. The self is overtaken in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence.”¹⁶⁵ The Marxian element of Adorno’s interpretation comes to the fore here. Buck-Morss’ further observes that, as enclosed in upon itself, the bourgeois subject “cannot grasp the actuality of the objects as commodities of capitalist production.”¹⁶⁶ Then directing our attention to Adorno’s statement that “their appearance character [*Scheincharakter*] is historically-economically produced through the alienation of the thing from its use value,” although “in the *intérieur* the things do not persist in appearing alien.”¹⁶⁷ In short, Kierkegaard, in his refusal of the world, accepts the world of cultural objects as nature: “objects which appear historically are arranged to appear as unchanging nature.”¹⁶⁸

Mirrors are prevalent throughout the various rooms of Kierkegaard’s interiority. To provide a concise example of how “the central motive of reflection belong to the *intérieur*” Adorno quotes again from Johannes’ Diary:

Why can you not be quiet and well behaved? You have done nothing the entire morning except to shake my awning, pull at my window mirror, play with the bell-rope from the third story, rattle the windowpanes, in short, in every possible way tried to get my attention.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Buck-Morss, 118.

¹⁶⁵ Adorno, 81. I am following Buck-Morss’ lead here in using this quote as an illustration.

¹⁶⁶ Buck-Morss, 118.

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, 81.

¹⁶⁸ Adorno, 81.

Here again, “against Kierkegaard’s intention,” we have an “image in which... social and historical material is sedimented.” After quickly noting how the bell-rope evidences that the space under discussion is that of the “spacious nineteenth-century apartment,” Adorno’s analysis focuses on the image of the “window-mirror.” A common furnishing of the time, the window-mirror was literally a mirror set just so as to reflect a window and thereby project a reflection of the world outside of the apartment into its interior space. Its function is “to project the endless row of apartment buildings into the isolated bourgeois living room; by the mirror, the living room dominates the reflected row at the same time that it is delimited by it.”¹⁷⁰ Again the subordination of the world to the subject does not release the subject from being determined by the world. However, if the Kierkegaardian form of reflective consciousness is like a mirror that can only be said to give an image of its own act of reflection, while it attempts to represent something exceeding itself, then the objectlessness that the window-mirror is said to be a testament to the manner that it is always, only what its surface reflects. As “the semblance of things,” then the mirror might be thought symbolic of the “imprisonment of mere spirit in itself,” of thought caught within its own construction, of the form of subjective-idealism that Kierkegaard is both guilty of remaining within, despite his honest attempts to escape, and paradoxically, successful in undermining via the aesthetic display of his failure to do so.

That these images are recorded as writing is essential. Sherman notes that, since “language, ostensibly the form of the communication of pure subjectivity, is itself

¹⁶⁹ Adorno, 41. Quoting Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 349-350.

¹⁷⁰ Adorno, 42.

sedimented by the historical dialectic,” and given that this sedimentation is what Kierkegaard refuses to recognize, that allows “external history’s meanings” to be found at the core of inwardness.¹⁷¹ In Adorno’s hands, Kierkegaard’s philosophical understanding and use of language becomes thematized in such a way that some scholars have begun to hold that it is “the theory of language as indirect communication that produces those familiar elements in Kierkegaard’s writings that we most readily attribute to his subjective particularity and its existential crises and not the other way around.”¹⁷² Regardless, that Kierkegaard’s struggle with idealism transpires within the arena of language is correct. The linguist subject cannot speak the concretion of his/her own particular awareness of self, at least not directly; yet it is in instances of its inability to say, its ironic undermining of itself, that indirectly and inexplicably a form of communion takes place. The philosophical form of Kierkegaard’s work is of the type wherein, in Adorno’s words, “spirit, image and language are linked.” And this is to say that, by Richter’s criteria, Kierkegaard’s work is the formation of a *Denkbild*. Kierkegaard’s indirect communication is an active transgression against modern philosophy’s emphasis on a purity of methodology, whether it be the transcendentalism of Kant or any of the attempts to reduce the world to epistemologically verifiable quantitative phenomena. Kierkegaard insists on the direct incommunicability of existential inwardness and the consequent assertion that for there to be hope in the

¹⁷¹ Sherman, 82.

¹⁷² Kevin Newmark, “Taking Kierkegaard Apart,” introduction to his translation of Sylvia Agacinski’s *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), 8.

possibility of such a task at all, his exposition must take an indirect, literary form.¹⁷³ His is a performance of the inescapability of the figurative dimension of the theoretical (as is Hegelian dialectical thought in general). One way his works can be said to do this is by expressing the tension between the universal and the particular, between the abstract, historical operations of language and the concrete experience or awareness of the individuated, linguistic subject with which these operations become known. The issue becomes one of whether and to what degree the subject's experience of its particularization as a form of non-identification with the conceptual operations of language can be taken to be evidential of its transcendence. Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard suggests that if Kierkegaard believed in an affirmative answer to this question, it was, after all, as Kierkegaard tells us himself, a product of faith, and thus one not capable of any objective verification and one that his thought only succeeds in engendering by failing to succeed in thinking it otherwise. Adorno correctly notes that, although in Kierkegaard "the 'I' is thrown back on itself by the superior power of otherness," he is "not a philosopher of identity;" that is, "he does not recognize any positive being that transcends consciousness."¹⁷⁴ Within Richter's formulation of thought-image, he states that "because there can be no theoretical concept that is free from the (unreliable) singularity of the particular shape that it necessarily assumes upon entering language ... the Denkbild, self-consciously exposes the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative;" by maintaining the tension between the particular and the universal, "rather than glossing over [it] ... in an effort to create

¹⁷³ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 216.

¹⁷⁴ Adorno, 128.

the false semblance of disembodied meaning.”¹⁷⁵ As the analysis of his images of interiority demonstrate, Kierkegaard’s efforts at an “objectless” form of inwardness do not succeed in the presentation of a disembodied, a-historical, eternal form of subjectivity – the historical conditions of the possibility of thinking such an empty abstraction are expressed in its attempts to escape them – the particular’s dependency on the abstract mechanisms of language for its expression, binds the individual to the immanence of historical contextualization. To the extent that the means of escape was indeed Kierkegaard’s intent, it is only one-half of his portrait constructed for us by Adorno, the half seated within the idealism his thought is famous for vehemently opposing. In his refusal to resolve the tension between the particular and the universal, the other half of Adorno’s thought-image of Kierkegaard is found. Here, the counter idealistic elements of Kierkegaard’s work are found within the aesthetic operations by the means of which it maintains a destabilization by “maintaining that the uncertainty of meaning is itself the meaning.” It is in this way that Kierkegaard’s thought strategically avoids making a statement of positive ontology.¹⁷⁶

A thought-image makes a particular demand upon its reader. Richter understands this to be a demanded “response to the otherness of singularity, to the ways in which it makes claims on us that cannot be verified by any metaphysical structure or universal certainty.” The particular stipulation upon the reader could be thought of as a challenge

¹⁷⁵ Richter, 25.

¹⁷⁶ Buck-Morss provides the following quote to illustrate this point: “The question of the meaning of existence [*Dasein*] is for him [Kierkegaard] not what existence is authentically [*eigentlich*], but rather: what would give meaning to existence, in itself meaningless.” Buck-Morss, 269.

to think his or her own particularity within the universal structures of language. Take the following passage from *Either/Or*:

My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush.¹⁷⁷

To the extent that the comprehension of one's own singularity as particular only has recourse to the categorical designations of words, it remains an impossible task, although the struggle for the expression of the impossible is not necessarily inefficacious. Richter states that, for "Adorno, a *Denkbild*, which works to say in words what cannot be said in words, launches an impossibility, indeed wishes to take that very impossibility as its principle."¹⁷⁸ Kierkegaard's pseudonym expresses the indifference the word bears in relation to the object it names. A consideration of the meaning of his life leads to a knowing that it could never be fully captured within the parameters of a definition. If meaning could be given in a word, it would have to be a word whose definition is multiplicitous, that indeed could mean any old thing at all – anything perhaps except nothing, as it will be given in words that categorically name it as one thing or the other. What this passage does is make of its own codification in language, its form, the theme of its content. Here again, Kierkegaard's writings appear to be at points emblematic of Richter's formulation of a *Denkbild*, according to which a thought-image seeks to transmit not just any conceptual content but to wrestle with its own status of language. "... Mournfully compar[ing] the idea of a fissured, fragmentary individual to that of an enigmatical disparate text," Adorno contends that this passage "gets to the heart of the

¹⁷⁷ Kierkegaard as quoted by Adorno, 139. This passage is taken from *Either/Or I*.

¹⁷⁸ Richter, 13.

matter” behind Kierkegaard’s statement that “the earthly and temporal as such are exactly what fall apart in the particular,” such that “it is impossible to lose or be deprived of all that is earthly, for the determinate of totality is a thought-determinate.”¹⁷⁹ The passage’s enigmatic core is rephrased, its performance of the meaningless of life as guarantor of the possibility of that life’s meaning replaced with a statement of “not the total self and its structure ... but the fragment of collapsing existence, free of all subjective ‘meaning.’”¹⁸⁰ The images Kierkegaard constructs effectuate an encounter with the limits of representational thought, and it is within this encounter that Adorno locates a negative dialectical counter-force to the reconciliatory dialectic of subjective idealism – the unstable tension between the forces of disruption and those of reconciliation is maintained by the Kierkegaardian “aesthetic as region of dialectical semblance.”¹⁸¹

The *Schnur* passage’s tonality is that of an ironic disinterest that disarms the universal’s hold over the particular. Such mock indifference contrasts with any concern for “transparent communication,” and its quest for a “secure ground of referentiality,” and exhibits, as a mode of writing, a conception of the “aesthetic as a realm in which signs first and foremost exhibit how writing communicates nothing but its own non-communicability;” what Richter terms “the scar of the Denkbild.”¹⁸² If the concretion of the subject eludes the concept, and this is, at least in part, what Kierkegaard is pointing to with the theme of an “incommunicable... existential reality”¹⁸³ of the individual, the

¹⁷⁹ Adorno, 139. The Kierkegaard passage is from *The Sickness Unto Death*.

¹⁸⁰ Adorno, 139.

¹⁸¹ Adorno, 131.

¹⁸² Richter, 30.

¹⁸³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Swenson, 320-321.

evasion transpires as an enactment of the unresolved tension between the particular and universal found in any intentional expression of reflexive self-awareness. The statement, rendered in mocked indifference to itself in the thought-image, affirms the impossibility of any meaningful thought of particularity as such, here, that of any particular meaning to life. By conveying itself as a performance of its own failure to convey, the thought-image paradoxically comes to convey the possibility of its truth as that which is dependent upon the gap between the subject and object remaining dialectically non-reconciled. Yet, the a-conceptual particularity Kierkegaard seeks to evidence indirectly—the meaning, as Adorno notes, that is “radically devolved upon the I, as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence”¹⁸⁴—the concrete individual is the showing of how the a-conceptuality of the subject, Kierkegaard’s impulse toward the abstractions of idealism, is not necessarily equated with a trans-historical absolute subject. When Adorno states that it is within its aesthetic characteristics that Kierkegaard’s thought “comes closest to reality,”¹⁸⁵ he is pointing out that many of Kierkegaard’s aphoristic images are indicative of a dialectical form of awareness, on the part of the aesthetic philosopher, of the determinations of its awareness of self being tied to the terms of its social and historical contextualization. At the same time, this contextualization is indirectly charged with being inadequate to the expression of the possibilities of the human spirit. Kierkegaard writes:

When I was very young, I forgot in the Trophonean cave how to laugh; when I became an adult, when I opened my eyes and saw actuality, then I started to laugh and have never stopped laughing since that time. I saw that the meaning of life was to make a living, its goal to become a councilor, that the rich delight of love was to acquire a well-to-do girl, that

¹⁸⁴ Adorno, 27.

¹⁸⁵ Adorno, 66.

the blessedness of friendship was to help each other in financial difficulties, that wisdom was whatever the majority assumed it to be, that enthusiasm was to give a speech, that courage was to risk being fined ten dollars, that cordiality was to say “May it do you good” after a meal, that piety was to go to communion once a year. This I saw, and I laughed.¹⁸⁶

Similar to the melancholic tone of “Adorno’s narrative persona in *Minima Moralia*,”

Kierkegaard gives voice to a “radical negativity that appears to circle... the maxim, ‘There is no right life in the false one’ [*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*].”¹⁸⁷

While the resignation of the aesthete is undeniable, Adorno’s negative maxim as not just a statement of resignation but, as Richter notes, “an implicit call to think the conditions of possibility for a transformation of the ‘false life’ into something else... which itself remains to be thought.”¹⁸⁸ One must wonder if humor would play an essential role in such a transfiguration of the experience of life—if, like Kierkegaard’s aesthete, we should wish most of all to “always have the laughter on [our] side.”¹⁸⁹ Could farce be the form of the philosophy yet to come? The form that would disengage the universal’s hold on the particular just long enough for a laugh? And what are we to say if we simply do not or cannot get the joke?

While the Frankfurt school arose, in part, as a critical response to the heritage of German Idealism, Adorno’s thought remained in dialogue with problems specific to the tradition of transcendental idealism. His reading of Kierkegaard is more suggestive for a re-reading of the Frankfurt School than this analysis has been able to indicate. If many of the members of the Frankfurt School “subscribed in mediated ways to the Idealist notion

¹⁸⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 34.

¹⁸⁷ Richter, 154. The maxim is from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Richter, 157.

¹⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, 43.

that the work of art participates in crucial ways in sublating the negative presence of the infinite within the finite,” as Richter at one point claims, then further critical analysis of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic might form a revealing commentary on this element of aesthetic idealism. The infinite presents itself as an issue, a question rightly termed existential in that the response it demands is one of a determination of the indeterminate, an actualization of the possibility before which, as one’s freedom, one stands before oneself anxious as before the demand of the affirmation of the impossible, for Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s writing makes contact with its reader in the same way that the autonomous work of art, for Adorno, conveys itself through an experiential contact with its indeterminacy that the viewer, the reader, the listener, must necessarily make determinate in his or her act of viewing, reading or listening.¹⁹⁰ “Artworks share with enigmas the duality of being determinate and indeterminate... they are question marks... [whose] answer is both hidden and demanded by the structure.”¹⁹¹ To pose this question, the writers of the *Denkbild* strive to “produce a form of writing that would allow the theoretical content of their work to be performed—rather than merely described by the logical and formal categories of philosophy.”¹⁹² In her book, *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno’s Aesthetics*, Shierry Nicholsen states that Adorno’s insistence that the form of his work is inseparable from its philosophical substance poses the greatest challenge to the acquisition of an appropriative understanding of his work that acknowledges the strong link between the negative dialectical structure of his thinking

¹⁹⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 124.

¹⁹¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 124.

¹⁹² Richter, 16.

and its aesthetic force of critique. To do so we must take a closer look at “an undervalued and underexamined aspect of Adorno’s work: the role of the subject and subjective experience.”¹⁹³ To think the subject without reification, without granting transcendental meaning to a purified immediacy of experience, and without making of the negative the positive, ontological structure of being, is a tall order. Richter’s deployment of the thought-image as a form of writing that attempts to avoid these pitfalls, offers us some much needed strategic assistance in this task. By facilitating a possible way of articulating understood the imaginative participation of the reader in the construction of a textual produced image, the theme of the thought-image provides one concrete approach to discussing fruitfully the aesthetic and pedagogical aspects of Adorno’s texts. Moreover, as this brief analysis hopes to have demonstrated, a closer examination of Kierkegaard’s influential role on the development of this aspect of the Frankfurt school is needed and promises to be one small avenue of an illuminative rereading of critical theory.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Shierry Weber Nichol森, *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno’s Aesthetics*, 6.

¹⁹⁴ To paraphrase Richter, the determination of the political content of an encounter with the aesthetic is neither its transmission of this or that content, nor its revelation of a communicable message – the aesthetic remains to be understood in terms of the specific and formal way in which it resists appropriation and instrumentalization (27). The political promise of what the *Denkbild* shows lies not in what it teaches about the political – but rather in its invitation to reconsider again and again the non-identical forms of political thinking that are enacted in artistic presentation. For Adorno, politics has migrated into the autonomous work of art – it penetrates most deeply into those works that present themselves as politically dead (22).

Chapter III

The Work of Freedom as Communication in *The Concept of Anxiety*

Freedom is always *communicerende* (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*).¹

There is not communication unless that which is said appears like the sign of that which must be hidden. The revelation is wholly in the impossibility of revelation (Maurice Blanchot, “Kierkegaard’s Journals”).²

Introductory Remarks

The unique characteristics of Kierkegaard’s style of writing, the elaborate, if not bizarre, use of a barrage of pseudonyms, the harmonious blending of the abstract character of dialectical thought with the lyrical power of the poetic, and the manner by which his works force the act of reading to become as much an analysis of the reader as of the words on the page, seem to point toward an understanding of the problem of communication for Kierkegaard as being primarily methodological. When taken in this

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 124.

² Maurice Blanchot, “Kierkegaard’s Journals,” in *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 19.

way, his inimitable style, which he himself designated with the appellation “indirect communication,” is comprehended as a strategic method deployed in an effort to communicate a specific truth. While there is no doubt that this truth would be existential and religious, to the extent that it is capable of being distinguished from its means of delivery, such truth would seem to become capable of unifying and even systematizing a body of writing that seems passionately determined to remain something other than a system. Yet this distinction between truth and its delivery is precisely what conceiving of Kierkegaard’s indirection as methodological effectuates; that is to say, if a method is to be articulated as form, then at one and the same time, the purpose of this method becomes articulated as the goal towards which it is put to use, as its underlying *raison d’etre*, and thus, conceiving of Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication” as a method of writing inevitably opens up the process of the work’s systematization by providing it with a “truth” around which it can be centered. Assuming we are to take the texts’ ostensible efforts to avoid being systematized in this way seriously, such an understanding, therefore, risks a radical misunderstanding of the problem of communication that rests at the heart of Kierkegaard’s authorship.

Rather than viewing “indirect communication” as a specific methodological strategy at times adopted by the author Kierkegaard, chosen, that is, as an alternative to a more direct or didactic form, could it not be an insight into a certain indirection resting at the heart of all communication that is put into effect and embodied by and through his style of writing? If this is possible, then underlying any conception of indirect communication as methodology, we might find an implicit theory of language as the driving force behind Kierkegaard’s authorship, a theory which, moreover and not

incidentally, shows itself to be inseparable from the means of writing by which it is conveyed. If, as Blanchot contends, it is the problem of communication with which all of Kierkegaard's activity as an author struggles, regardless of whether the products of this activity be pseudonymous, signed, or private journal entries,³ and if this problem is potentially misunderstood as an effort to devise a method to communicate a specific truth, then the question arises as to what precisely is the issue against which Kierkegaard's endeavor to communicate forms itself as a struggle. The two quotes serving as the epigraph to this present activity of writing, the first penned by one Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, the latter by Blanchot in his short essay on Kierkegaard's journals, when taken together as a commentary on both the significance and complexity of the issue of communication found in Kierkegaard's authorship, provide an interpretative opening within which the possibility of uncovering an answer to this question can be glimpsed, however indirectly.

A designation of freedom as *communicerende*, that is, as the activity of communication itself, inextricably links freedom to disclosure and thereby implicates the conditions for the possibility of the occurrence of freedom within the conditional limits of language. As freedom, the work of communication becomes analogous to that ever elusive qualitative shift, Kierkegaard's famous "leap" into faith or sin, that itself effectively and perpetually eludes conceptualization and therefore evades a

³ Blanchot, "Kierkegaard's Journals." For an exposition of Blanchot's approach to Kierkegaard see Kevin Newmark's insightful essay "Taking Kierkegaard Apart" which is included as the prefatory chapter in his translation of Sylviane Agacinski's work *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), 8-10. There, Newmark contends that Blanchot's insight into the structural impossibility of communicating truth in language embodied by Kierkegaard's work as a whole allows for his ostensible existentialism, that is, his thematization of the single individual alone before the choice of the three existence spheres of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, to be reconceived as a "subjective mask" used to convey an implicit and non-subjective theory of meaning as differential signification.

communicability achievable by the conceptual work of language. As a consequence, both the operations of language and the subject who enlists these operations in an effort of free disclosure, find themselves entrapped within a paradox. Communication works by means of and against the non-conceptual character of the very freedom that is nothing other than its own occurrence, or, to say it differently, while communication is dependent upon the ability of language to effectively translate experience into concepts, to render the particular in the universal, at one and the same time, it is dependent upon the inability of its own operations to be effectively caught within any conceptual framework that it builds. Framed within a discussion of any particular speaking individual, one might say that the paradox of the union of communication with freedom expresses a certain linguistic double-bind, which both constitutes and holds the individual within a paradoxical space: namely, on the one hand, the insight that the individual does not exist independently from the words she uses to communicate herself both to herself and others, that these words, as it were, speak her as much as she experiences speaking them, while on the other, the insight that these words are incapable of directly expressing the experience of their being freely spoken, an experience so concretely finite as to remain forever outside the expressive capacity of language, given that this capacity is contained within the universal communicability it affords experience by means of the abstract. Thus, the communication of freedom, the freedom of communication, remains barred from any direct form of discourse, but this is precisely what all communication strives to deliver – its success, thus, seems a veritable communion over the abyss of the non-conceptual. Keeping in mind that according to Vigilius, “it does not harm even to take

into consideration the religious significance of the word [*communicerende*],”⁴ communication as communion, if it is to be successful, must paradoxically transpire within and by means of language, yet, in such a way, that the expressive capacity of the linguistic outstrips itself and thus uncovers, indirectly, that which is beyond language as an alterity it speaks out against, but nonetheless communicates through a showing of its very failure to be effectively conveyed – or as Blanchot expresses, the revelatory content of communication resides exactly in its own impossibility.

If the “truth” that Kierkegaard’s writing attempts to embody and communicate is this paradox resulting from the interpenetration of freedom and communication, then it would be a “truth” whose content is inseparable from the means of its delivery, and, as a thought which “knows how to let thought collide with the unthinkable,”⁵ inconceivable in isolation from the writing through which it takes place. In other words, it will be a truth that can only be conveyed by making problematic its own utterance, one that can only be communicated indirectly as an aftereffect, so to speak, of a writing that takes place on the very limits of the conceptual. It is the enacting of such a writing that we find in *The Concept of Anxiety*, a work that although appearing to be one of Kierkegaard’s most direct and didactic,⁶ proves to be, when considered in this way, both exemplary and

⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 124.

⁵ Kierkegaard, 27.

⁶ Vigilius Haufniensis [Watchman of the Harbor, i.e., Copenhagen] is the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*. The pseudonymous status of this work differs most significantly from works like *Either/Or* in that Vigilius is less ostensibly a conceptual persona; that is to say, unlike the Judge from *Either/Or*, who enacts through his writings the characterization of the ethical view he represents and, in so doing, dramatically personifies a concept, Vigilius appears to be engaged in a direct and didactic form of writing and thus seems to be less of an imaginary conceptualization himself. The apparent and relative attenuation of dramatic personification in this work may, however, only serve to belie a deepening of the use of this device. This is suggested by Kierkegaard’s remarks in his journals in reference to this pseudonym: “... I always have a poetic relationship to my works, and therefore I am pseudonymous. At the same time as the book develops some theme, the corresponding individuality is delineated. For

revelatory of his infamous indirection. Indeed, as I hope to be able to show in the following analysis, this text, when understood as a commentary upon “indirect communication,” exhibits this indirection to be more than merely a rhetorical or methodological tool that an author could employ in an attempt to communicate a specific truth, but to be nothing less than a putting on display of an indirection inherent to all communication, a showing, that is, of the paradoxical intertwining of freedom with communication that, in the end, may be synonymous with the work of freedom itself.

example, Vigilius Haufniensis delineates several, but I have also made a sketch of him in the book.” Kierkegaard, *JP V 5732*); cf. translator’s notes to *The Concept of Anxiety*, 222.

i. Innocence and the Word or Original Sin as the Birth of Linguistic Understanding

This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*).⁷

From the fact that Adam was able to talk, it does not follow in a deeper sense that we was able to understand what was said (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*).⁸

As its subtitle, “a simple psychologically orienting deliberation on the dogmatic issue of hereditary sin,” suggests, *The Concept of Anxiety* is a work riddled with Kierkegaard’s famous use of irony. In consisting of several divisions and subdivisions, each demarcating one more distinctive cut into the work’s apparent subject matter of anxiety, this text is certainly not “simple” in purpose; and quite the contrary to being an “orienting” discourse of deliberation, the text’s seemingly endless and ambiguous deployment of concepts is productive of a veritable “disorientation” of the perspective of any would-be reader. Indeed, one contemporary scholar goes so far as describing the disorienting effect of this particular work as generating a sense of “being against the reader rather than for him,” of even “being humiliated” by being “forced into a reading position where he is helpless.”⁹ If the subtitle’s irony is misleading in regards to the

⁷ Kierkegaard, 41.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 45.

⁹ Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 85. Although such a statement at first seems a bit excessive, Poole’s reasons for describing the text in this manner prove quite insightful. According to Poole, *The Concept of Anxiety* was intended to be a “parody of a textbook;” that is, “its basic textual ploy is to feed what appear to be key terms into the narrative or argument in the order of their logical importance, but then every time a term is reused, to add a significant qualification or modification.” Thus, in seeming mockery of a well-written textbook where key terms are clearly defined, the most important terms in this work become progressively less well defined while, at the same time, the text appears to be “laboring for clarity and comprehensibility.” Poole, 100.

text's approach to its subject matter, then at least, it would seem, that the subject matter itself is given to us without equivocation through the main terms of the title as a whole, that is, original or hereditary "sin,"¹⁰ "the concept," and "anxiety." However, while conceptuality as such may be rightfully seen as the structuring ground against which the attempted figurations of sin and anxiety that the book enacts are drawn, both sin as a concrete occurrence of the misuse of freedom whose nature is to have "no place"¹¹ and anxiety as a mood (*Stemning*) revelatory of "freedom's actuality,"¹² demonstrate themselves in their relation to freedom to be beyond the explanatory range of any concept. Hence, the most decisive level of irony might be found in the title proper; at least, that is to say, to the extent that the concept of anxiety reveals itself to be only the limit concept of the non-conceptual.

In his introductory remarks, Haufniensis tells us that, in regard to sin, his emphasis will not be on its actuality, since any particular and actual misuse of freedom as freedom remains beyond the descriptive power of the concept, but, rather, on the question of sin as a possibility; that is, his efforts will be expended in attempting to provide psychological descriptions of various states wherein the human subject is such as to have sin as a potential way of existing. In other words, it is with an account of such a subject's

¹⁰ *Arvesynden* is the Danish word Thomte translates as "hereditary sin." Walter Lowrie's earlier translation of *The Concept of Anxiety* used "original sin" to translate the same word. The choice of either word seems less than ideal, given that in English "hereditary" is not necessarily associated with the meanings attributed to "originary" nor is the word "original" commonly associated with the connotations of "hereditary." Much of the discussion in the text of *Arvesynden* plays off of the potential dual meaning of the word, which serves to elucidate both the commonality and difference between Adam and every subsequent individual: the originality of Adam's sin being only quantitatively different from the "first" sin of any given individual and qualitatively the same. In an effort to keep this ambiguity in play, in this essay I will use both "original" and "hereditary" sin interchangeably.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, 14.

¹² Kierkegaard, 42.

freedom, and thus his or her ability to sin, that his descriptions of psychological states will be occupied – the evidence for the actuality of freedom however will not be discovered by means of an abstract unearthing of the ontological structure of a subject thus freely conceived, but rather will be found within the affective space which “to the extent that in every state possibility is present”¹³ is manifest as anxiety over this possibility. While, “psychology has anxiety as its object,”¹⁴ anxiety itself, as Heidegger has made famous, in distinction from the emotion of fear, has as its object nothing at all – that is, the nothingness pointing toward, in Vigilius’ words, “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.”¹⁵ As an affective “state,” which marks a space of indetermination, hence of no place or no thing at all, anxiety, when considered as a concept, seems to effectuate a disruption of conceptual knowledge. Analogous to any actual free act, anxiety, as a mood, simply cannot be thought. However, the attempt to do so, even if destined to failure, may nonetheless effect an exposure, an uncovering, as it were, of the existence of the very “possibility” which would support a qualification of any individual human subject as free.¹⁶ Having not just possibility but the “possibility of possibility” as its object, anxiety serves to disclose freedom as the ambiguous occurrence of an existence contingent on nothing, and in this way, having no ground upon which it

¹³ Kierkegaard, 113.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 113.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 42. *cf.* Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), §40 and “What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 100-101.

¹⁶ The productivity of failure as a mechanism at work in Kierkegaard’s indirect communication will be taken up in more detail later in this essay. Suffice it to say for now, I see this dimension of the productivity of failure found throughout Kierkegaard’s writings to be an essential part of a certain performative showing of a failure constitutive of all communication that, nonetheless, may be viewed as paradoxically succeeding at communicating the incommunicable.

may firmly ground possibility in actuality once and for all. “Dizziness” is felt before this “yawning abyss”¹⁷ of possibility, an unease whose ambiguity is expressed in Vigilius’ description of anxiety as “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.”¹⁸

Freedom as the event of the “qualitative leap,” which we are told is not determined by any quantifiable elements, is before itself angst ridden in that it simultaneously dreads and desires its own actualization, the possibility, that is, of its possibility becoming actuality, quite literally of its own “being able.”¹⁹ The ambiguity expressed in anxiety over freedom is due, on the one hand, to freedom insofar as actual, insofar, that is, as “it is,”²⁰ as it is existing in an unfettered relation to necessity and thus in a relation of radical responsibility to itself, while, on the other hand, and in the same moment, as concrete, existing in a world of preformed social/historical linguistic meaning from which it experiences its own possibilities as being inextricably bound. As Vigilius reminds us, a freedom conceived entirely in the abstract, a “*liberum arbitrium*,” has no more “existed in the world in the beginning” than it does now, “in a late [historical] period.”²¹ In contradistinction from both a materialistic and/or dialectical determinism, which would effectively eradicate the existence of the pure unformed possibility conditional for the existence of actual freedom and from a form of “spiritualism” that ensures the freedom of the human will by securing it within the existence of a substantial soul only conceivable as pure abstraction from the world, which

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, 61.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, 42.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, 49.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, 22.

²¹ Kierkegaard, 49.

would in turn serve to eliminate the concrete pre-figurations of possibility also required if freedom is to exist in actuality, the version of freedom revealed to Vigilius Haufniensis through his analysis of anxiety is ambiguously involved within the world in which it discovers itself. To the extent that this “world” is itself a product of “freedom,” anxiety can be thought to be paradoxically involved in itself. Our author writes:

Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom [conceived *in abstracto*]; it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity but in itself. If sin has come into the world by necessity (which is a contradiction), there can be no anxiety. Nor can there be any anxiety if sin came into the world by an act of abstract *liberum arbitrium*.²²

Hence, the conditions for the possibility of the occurrence of “sin” will not be found within the events of history, since such events, when conceived as predeterminations, would make of the possibility inherent to freedom and thus sin a necessity. Neither will the conditions be found within the movements of a purely disinterested and thus disconnected will, since such a conception would make the transference of possibility into actuality as freedom forever only a possibility for thought and never a concrete reality. Again, the evidence serving to back up this claim of freedom’s self entanglement is the objectless “object” of the whole enquiry, that is, the affective disorientation of anxiety itself. To what, then, do we owe this ambiguity revealed by anxiety to be at the heart of freedom in such a way that freedom is aware of its own entanglement? What exactly is the nature of possibility’s entangled relation to itself such that anxiety is both the condition of freedom’s possibility and the trace of freedom’s loss?

While the indeterminate and non-conceptual nature of Kierkegaardian freedom may bar one from providing conclusive answers to these questions in a way that would

²² Kierkegaard, 49.

put a halt to inquiry, considerable insight into the intricacies of entangled freedom are afforded by a consideration of freedom and anxiety's relations to language – after all, we haven't forgotten that, according to Haufniensis, freedom and communication, and thereby language and freedom, are inextricably bound to one another: “freedom is *communicerende*.” Could, then, that “antipathetic sympathy,” within which freedom relates to itself as possibility, be attributable to freedom's work being entrapped within the confines of language, or rather might it be that such an entrapment is somehow paradoxically not confining at all, that it, on the contrary, by forming and providing the limits of freedom's expression, concurrently, forms the point of contact with that which remains beyond expression, with that possibility that entirely resists any disclosure whatsoever, with that nothingness that assures that language is an open, not closed, system of signification? Is language, in this way, both the determination of freedom, which would not be one of necessity, and the conditional point of freedom's indeterminacy, which, in like manner, would not be an empty point of abstraction, that gives rise to freedom as a form of anxiety without end?

In his recent work on Kierkegaard and language, Geoffrey Hale posits a thesis the substance of which bolsters the prospects of beginning to answer this last question in the affirmative. According to Hale, the driving motivation behind Kierkegaard's project of “indirect communication” is his insight into the inescapability of the finitude inherent to the work of language and the consequent “fragmentary” nature of all communication. In regard, then, to the “truth” that such indirectness strives to convey, it is claimed to be inseparable from the fragmentary form of its presentation. Indeed, for Hale:

The “truth” of the text is its fragmentation, its incompleteness within itself, not some ideal and therefore external meaning. This “truth” –

the fragment – thus is not the goal of meaning, but its condition. And as its condition, it must also be understood paradoxically to condition the very meaning it cannot secure. *There can be no language without meaning, and yet there can be no meaning that is not already fragmented in and by the finite occurrence of language.*²³

That is to say, Hale sees Kierkegaard's writing as an enacting of what I am calling the paradox resulting from the unification of freedom and communication. Meaning or truth as universal seems held out to us as a possibility insofar as language is capable of giving it expression, yet, at one and the same time, the very activity of language, given that it is irrevocably tied to the particularity of its finite occurrence, perpetually resists such a universal disclosure of meaning. Yet, the finitude, which at first appears to be an impediment to communication achieving its end, when considered in this way, is also paradoxically the condition for the possibility of any communication; that is, as fragmentary, it is productive of an aperture within any system of meaning that keeps that system open to acts of free interpretation. Fragmentation is, therefore, the fissure that results from the contact of the finitude of communication with the seeming infinitude of freedom. To the extent that concrete communicative acts of speech only have recourse to the universal and abstract medium of language for their expression, their fragmentary finitude is in a way beyond the power of linguistic disclosure, yet it is, at the same time,

²³ Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 15. Although Hale does not include a discussion of *The Concept of Anxiety* in this work, his thesis, with perhaps only slight modifications, can be confirmed most effectively by turning to this text. However, Hale's work is most compelling in its proposal that the possibility of reading Kierkegaard only exists when the text's fragmentary characteristics and Kierkegaard's active attempt to undermine his own authority are "encountered, not corrected." Hale, 32. The majority of Kierkegaardian scholarship thus in attempting to interpret the works in such a way that an underlying principle of authorial truth is posited, allowing, as it were, for a truth external from the texts to provide a principle of systematic unification, have therefore failed to have even "read" the texts under consideration. The exceptions to this failure have been "beyond the realm of scholarly commentary;" that is, they are to be found in those who, under the influence of Kierkegaard, have continued the project of displaying a fragmentary truth in their own work, namely, in the writings of Kafka, Rilke, and Adorno.

this ineffable concretion that renders such acts undetermined and, thus, free acts of expression. For Hale, and for Kierkegaard as read by Hale, this makes any act of communication at all into an “indirect” procedure; hence, “the indirection of communication is the inevitable consequence of the very fragmentary finitude that characterizes all language ... and accordingly, every conception of the subject.”²⁴ Thus, it seems possible that the finitude of language can be seen to fulfill both the determinant and indeterminate qualifications necessary for the existence of Kierkegaard’s ambiguous form of freedom, the freedom that is evidenced in being undergone in and through anxiety and is ambiguous precisely in being intertwined with its occurrence within a linguistic subject.

Through serving as a commentary on the relation of freedom to language, *The Concept of Anxiety* provides us with a means of fleshing out such a claim to the effect that it is, so to speak, the nature of language, in distinction from the language of nature, that is, from any conception of a pre-linguistic metaphysical “truth,” that is generative of Kierkegaard’s efforts to communicate truth indirectly. This ambiguity of freedom tied to language and revealed in anxiety is explicitly discussed in Vigilius Haufniensis’ interpretation of the narrative of the fall of Adam. A presupposition of the possibility of original sin, both in Adam and in every subsequent individual, is that individual’s subsistence in a state of “innocence” which precedes the sinful act. This state of innocence is, accordingly, only lost as a result of the “qualitative leap of the individual.”²⁵ As qualitative, this use of freedom, in itself, is entirely undetermined by any “quantifiable

²⁴ Hale, 20.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, 37.

determination” and, as a consequence, sin is a leap which “presupposes itself,”²⁶ in short, as an event of the actuality of freedom, the originality of sin remains beyond thought, to the extent that it can be thought as only an “offense.” Yet, if the actuality of sin presupposes itself, its possibility can nonetheless be glimpsed through the correspondence of the state of innocence, which sin presupposes, with a state of ignorance, from which the fall permanently excludes the individual. Vigilius writes:

Innocence is ignorance... In this state there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety.²⁷

What is profound about the state of innocence as the necessary pre-condition for sin is that this state of “repose,” wherein “man is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition,”²⁸ is inconceivable in isolation from the troubling affects of anxiety. Insofar as this state of innocence is comprehended as the pure potentiality for freedom, that is, to the extent that it is indistinguishable from the “nothing” of unrealized possibility, it is tantamount to nothing other than anxiety itself. However, as ignorance, this form of anxiety is not yet aware of itself as the occurrence of freedom that it is – as Vigilius states, “the spirit in man is dreaming.”²⁹

The movement, then, from the state of innocence to the state of guilt which comprises the first sin as original sin, that is, not “first in the numerical sense” but in

²⁶ Kierkegaard, 32.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, 41.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, 41.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, 41.

regards to the “nature of the quality,”³⁰ is analogous to the awakening of spirit, and this awakening is suggested to be synonymous with nothing less than the emergence of self-conscious subjectivity from its slumber within a pre-conscious state of unity with the world. “Awake, the difference between myself and my other is posited; sleeping, it is suspended; dreaming, it is an intimated nothing.”³¹ Kierkegaard’s enigmatic understanding of the human self or “spirit” as being primarily the self-relation of a synthesizing activity taking place within that dialectical tension held open between the psychical and the physical, the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal,³² in this way, seems to come into the world simultaneously with an awareness of difference, one might say, an awareness of difference as distance between the self and the world, even perhaps between the self and the self, a distance that is necessary for any reflective self-consciousness. Yet, this is a form of knowledge and, as such, only comes into being after the transgression of the prohibition against eating of its fruit, that is, after the loss of innocence. Given that potential freedom only becomes aware of itself after having become actualized as sin, since only then is awareness, that is, knowledge, itself a possibility, it is apparent that “anxiety” as revelatory of the “nothingness” of possibility which outstrips all awareness, all knowing, “is the pivot upon which everything turns;”³³ but, of equal consequence, although perhaps not equally apparent, is that the ambiguity characteristic of anxiety, its unsynchronized movement of attraction and repulsion, is a direct consequence of the self’s awareness of itself being proportionate to the

³⁰ Kierkegaard, 30.

³¹ Kierkegaard, 41-42.

³² cf. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³³ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 43.

comprehensibility afforded to itself by language. Could the fall from innocence as ignorance into guilt as knowledge, according to the interpretation provided here by Kierkegaard's pseudonym, be tantamount to the fall of language itself into an awareness of its confinement within finite self-conscious speaking subjects?

That something similar to such a fall into linguistic understanding is indeed the case is suggested by Vigilius' repeated insistence that insofar as Adam's action was entirely an act of freedom, then it must be the case that the prohibition given to him in no way predisposed him to act; on the contrary, even if the prohibition is productive of anxiety in that it "awakens in him freedom's possibility," this is only an "anxious possibility of *being able*," while having "no conception of what he is able to do."³⁴ Vigilius stretches this so far as to claim that indeed when the prohibition was given against the consumption of the fruit bearing the knowledge of good and evil, along with the accompanying promise of death as punishment in the event of disobedience, Adam, in his state of pure ignorance, would be entirely incapable of comprehending the meaning of the words that were being spoken. His anxious awareness of "being able" is thus entirely bereft of content; he "knows" only that he is in possession of a capacity for doing something the meaning of which remains entirely hidden from his view – otherwise, "that which comes later [that is, after the fall from ignorance into knowing], the difference between good and evil, would have to be presupposed."³⁵ Yet, this is not to say that Adam was incapable of speech, nor that he was incapable of sensing "the terrifying" as a force embodied in the incomprehensibility of the words of prohibition, but only that his ignorance of the difference between good and evil precludes his ability "to understand

³⁴ Kierkegaard, 44.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, 45.

what was said [in] a deeper sense,”³⁶ and perhaps even his ability to understand at all, including any understanding presupposed by reflective and self-aware consciousness as such – here we can see that the awakening of spirit following as a consequence of the fall, as an awareness of freedom, is directly related to the genesis of a particularly linguistic form of knowing – one consciousness, however, whose constitutive component is “nothing but the ambiguity of anxiety.”³⁷ “Spirit” as the efficacy of differentiation opening up the space within which the self arises as a relation to itself, as the difference required for the understanding of the relational structure of subjectivity as relational, in this way, comes to itself as having itself “outside of itself,”³⁸ and it is within the split between the self and itself, between the self and its own possibility, that the self as spirit finds itself as anxious.

In his work, “*Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard*,” Peter Fenves understands the role of anxiety in the Genesis narrative as indicative of the inherent self-referentiality of language itself. If, as Vigilius claims, spirit relates itself to itself only through the ambiguity of attraction and repulsion that is anxiety, then, according to Fenves:

In referring to itself, which is not a “thing” and gives not point of reference, anxiety opens up the linguistic space of the self, as the relation of mind to body, but the space thereby disclosed is *only* linguistic. In this space the self takes place ... the fall into “sin” presents the arrival of the self in the place of utterly self-referential language as an event in which concepts and their fields of reference, not the self itself, flourish.³⁹

³⁶ Kierkegaard, 45.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, 45.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, 44.

³⁹ Peter Fenves, “*Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard*” (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 79. In this dense and groundbreaking work of scholarship, Fenves offers a reading of several of

Would, then, this realm of self-referential conceptuality that provides the clearing within which the activity called the self takes place not be, as an anxious knowing of the conceptual limitations of all communicative meaning, at one and the same time, an awareness of the self as the “nothingness” of “possibility” which forms the alterity against which the power of conceptual understanding remains impotent? And is this not precisely the paradoxical situation of a subject whose freedom is bound to its communicative acts? In other words, the “linguistic space of the self,” if we grant this possibility, revealed in and through anxiety, is a space without substance, at least, that is, insofar as substantiality is contingent upon the conceptual work of language. Fenves continues, “not only is anxiety self-referential, but its self-referentiality denies language ... the substantiality and permanence of an ‘I’ who could refer all of its sentences to itself.”⁴⁰ Thus, what Adam, and supposedly each subsequent individual, comes to discover in the fall into a state of knowing, which uncovers the meaning behind the words of the prohibition spoken against him, is the finitude and particularity by which his act of freedom has already occurred. He only comes to “understand” that prohibition, indeed, as a prohibition, retrospectively to its transgression, and thus, the particularity that he is,

Kierkegaard’s texts, including *The Concept of Anxiety*, that both tackles the difficulty of their indirectness without reducing it to authorial voice of authority that just isn’t present in the works and offers a position that calls into question the most common approaches to his texts. Rather than viewing “chatter” as a negative phenomenon of an age that has become too reflective, that is, rather than seeing Kierkegaard’s apparent disdain of such a phenomenon from a normative stance, Fenves proposes that it is the emptiness of chatter itself, the possibility that language holds out of somehow communicating “nothing” that Kierkegaard’s texts are seeking to imitate and thus convey. As Hale says of this work, it is such a “concrete articulation of the ways in which the unavoidable possibility that language somehow also communicates nothing,” that “poses the greatest challenge to the very centrality of notions of subjectivity and divinity in Western philosophical and theological traditions.” Hale, *Kierkegaard the Ends of Language*, 12.

⁴⁰ Fenves, 79.

is revealed to him as a freedom already lost, put differently, as being simultaneously dependent upon and alienated from the conceptual world of knowledge which it produces through language. Adam only comes to understand the paradox of freedom's inherence within language; he only comes to an understanding of himself in his particularity after having overstepped the limitations of universality within which language holds him, and, along with him, any other particular speaking subject. Freedom, as entangled with itself, can be seen in this way to be tantamount to language's entanglement with its own limitations. Most important among these limitations, and the one characterized by the ambiguity of anxiety itself, is the inability of language to speak successfully, at least not directly, an enunciator behind any of its particular enunciations. The self, try as it might to do otherwise, simply cannot speak itself; it only speaks words, which, to the extent that they express a universal or conceptual meaning, always miss their mark. Yet, this is not because this self subsists as a substance behind the words it produces; on the contrary, it is due to this finite and particular having no substantial existence, that is, to its existence as the work of nothing, of the pure "possibility of possibility" whose movement is productive of anxiety. Insofar as subjectivity itself is dependent upon the specifically linguistic form of knowing arising after the movement from innocence to guilt, the "presupposition of hereditary [originary] sin" is not "the existence of an already constituted subject" but "the speech of language itself."⁴¹ Like Adam, we too find ourselves as an un-substantial finitude held outside of the universal translatability of the

⁴¹ Fenves, 80. While it is clear that Kierkegaard therefore does not locate the genesis of language in humanity, he stops short of providing any speculation as to its true origin, since this would, no doubt, take him into the realm of the dogmatic and away from psychology. However, as Fenves indicates, it is certainly worth noting the following remark omitted from the final work but included in the draft: "If anyone wishing to instruct me should say, 'consistent with the preceding you of course, could say, 'It [the serpent] is language,' I would reply, 'I did not say that.'" Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 185.

concepts we deploy in speaking. Could we, then, choose, in an effort to preserve the holding open of possibility effectuated by the nothingness of this finitude, not to speak? Can one refuse to be the linguistically determined yet determining component of the linguistic that one is? Can one freely refuse the paradox of the alignment of freedom and communication? Chances are that such an attempted refusal to be the ambiguous occurrence of freedom that one always already is, although destined to fail, is itself quite commonplace – perhaps it is even a structural element of subjectivity being linguistically bound. It is to this possibility, as it is thematized much later in the book by our author as the phenomenon of the “demonic,” that this inquiry will now turn.

ii. The Demonic

With wisdom has someone declared a word of distinction: that evil seems good to one whose mind the god leads to ruin (Sophocles, *Antigone*) ...⁴²

... for anxiety can just as well express itself by muteness as by a scream (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*).⁴³

The observations that comprise the various sections of *The Concept of Anxiety* are concerned with the descriptions of concrete psychological states of an individual. What lies outside the descriptive capacity of psychology are the qualitative shifts, the leaps, wherein “[t]he history of the individual life proceeds in a movement from state to state.”⁴⁴ The states can be understood to fall roughly into two primary categories: occurring prior to the qualitative leap into a state of sin and serving thereby as the condition for the possibility of such a leap being performed freely, namely innocence as ignorance, or those occurring after and as a consequence of the event of just such a leap, the paragon of which is the state of the demonic.⁴⁵ Anxiety is the attendant present to both categories

⁴² Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. David Grene, in *Sophocles I: The Complete Greek Tragedies*, eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 85. The aptness with which this choral line from Sophocles’ play expresses the demonic state of being in anxiety over the good did not, perhaps, escape Kierkegaard’s notice. The pseudonymous esthete of the first volume of *Either/Or* refers to this passage in its often-quoted Latin form, “*quem deus vult perdere, primum dementat*,” to support his claim that anxiety is a “genuine tragic category.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 155.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 119.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, 113.

⁴⁵ This is not to say that the demonic is somehow in itself expressive of the entire range of states resulting from the fall into sin but that it is the state wherein the consequences of such a fall are most consciously apprehended in a state of self-awareness that is, to say it succinctly, terrifying enough to generate self-deception. In chapter three, modern spiritlessness, classical fate, and guilt are discussed as expressive of states wherein anxiety appears as a consequence of the leap but the individual nonetheless is not aware of sin. The beginning sections of chapter four discuss “Anxiety about Evil” and serve as the counterpoint to the demonic as “Anxiety about the Good.”

precisely again as "... freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility,"⁴⁶ which serves as an ever present reminder that another movement or qualitative shift is always present as the presence of possibility, a presence, then, of nothingness. As "anxiety about the good," the demonic expresses an apprehension of this nothingness in the form of a turning away, that is, a retreat that treats this "nothing" as "something," as either a quantitatively determined instant or as a product of abstract reflection, and thus avoids having to face the freedom that lies before it as the task of communication. While the good that the demoniac would attempt to flee from can be signified as "the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it,"⁴⁷ this should not allow us to forget that, as the event of freedom, "[t]he good cannot be defined at all;"⁴⁸ that is to say, freedom as the qualitative shift of imperceptible movement that is the self in its concretion can never be fully understood by means of the abstractions of language. Moreover, as will be shown in what is to follow, any attempt to comprehend the entanglement of freedom in the abstract, to make the possibility of freedom into thought rather than task, will be for this reason an occurrence of the phenomenon of demonic deception and, thus, will manifest itself concretely as anxiety about the good.

The definition we are given of the state of the demonic is that it is "anxiety about the good." Yet, in a footnote, we find stated without equivocation that "the good is freedom."⁴⁹ To the extent, then, that freedom is always communicating, always "*communicerende*," and to the extent that the demonic is a state of anxiety occurring after

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, 42.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, 119.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, 111.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 11.

the fall, which is tantamount to the birth of the awareness of linguistic knowing, the demonic seems to be a state of anxiety explicitly over the work of freedom as communication. As an active form of resistance toward disclosure, that as we will see, nonetheless discloses itself precisely as a failure of communication, the state of the demoniac can be seen to mirror that activity of language's attempt to flee its own finite occurrence, an effort which, in the end, only serves to show how language is inextricably bound to the finitude it continually attempts to transcend. While the psychological states and the transitional shifts between these states have been explicitly separated, the former revealing themselves to the observational activities of the psychologist, while the latter, as the qualitative dimension of freedom, perpetually repel such conceptualization, this split between what can and cannot be understood conceptually must itself be acknowledged as a feat of abstract conceptualization. Recognizing the complicity between the capacity to make such a claim of the non-conceptual status of freedom and abstract reflection itself, that is, recognizing this claim of non-conceptualization's dependence upon the ability to conceptualize, allows for the development of the insight that "only in the good is there a unity of state and transition."⁵⁰ This insight proves crucial to an understanding of the demonic that, as we will see, is tantamount to the self's recognition of its own act of misapprehending itself, of un-freedom mistaking itself for freedom through disassociating itself from the concreteness of communication. That which reveals itself to be irreconcilable within thought, namely the act of abstract reflection and its sought after object of the movement of existence, reveals the reconciliation between thought and act to reside outside the limit point of thinking itself

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, 113. At page 135 the statement is repeated, "... for only the good is the unity of state and movement."

as the somewhat mysterious occurrence of freedom as communication.⁵¹ To posit the event of freedom as falling within the confines of the thinkable, within, that is, the realm of the abstract, is to posit a false actuality that covers over, though never entirely, the anxious opening of the possibility of the possibility that is always lived through as a concrete task of disclosure – this covering over is again the sophistical work of the demonic, a work that is allowed for, by the somewhat ambiguous status the demonic displays in relation to actuality and possibility:

If the question were raised as to what extent the demonic is a problem for psychology, I must reply, the demonic is a state. Out of this state, the particular sinful act can constantly break forth. However, the state is a possibility, although in relation to innocence it is an actuality posited by the qualitative leap.⁵²

Depending, then, on the point of view one adopts, the demonic can be seen as either a state within which possibility reveals itself as anxiety over the good (freedom) or a state within which actuality manifests itself as an effort to outrun the very same anxious apprehension of possibility. The actual demoniac, the individual caught within the deceptive snares of the demonic, makes the tragic error of mistaking the latter viewpoint, which he enacts in relation to himself, for an actual occurrence of freedom; put differently, the demoniac mistakes his own state for that unity of state and transition found only in the unthinkable concretion of freedom, and to the extent that he succeeds in mistaking himself for some-thing (as object of thought) that he is not, he does so through

⁵¹ Perhaps this is illustrative of the paradox that “is the passion of thought” mentioned by Johannes Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*: “This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

⁵² Kierkegaard, 123.

the enlisting of abstract reflection – mistaking, in due course, the actuality of concretion with the false actuality of “the empty abstraction of inclosing reserve.”⁵³

If we are to understand the state of the demoniac, we must make an effort to penetrate this cover of “empty abstraction” to get into an interiority that by definition resists being disclosed, that is “unfreedom that wants to close itself off.”⁵⁴ Our point of entry into this experiential structure will be within those spaces wherein the demonic communicates itself, despite its best intentions, as a failure or disrapture of the continuity of communication itself. The difficult task will be in forcing this dislocation of communication to reveal the self that lies beneath it, to reveal the secret of its own operations – the key to doing so is found in the realization that it is freedom itself that underlies the operations of the demonic:

The demonic is *inclosing reserve* [*det Indesluttede*] and the *unfreely disclosed*. The two definitions indicate, as intended, the same thing, because inclosing reserve is precisely the mute, and when it is to express itself, this must take place contrary to its will, since freedom, which underlies unfreedom or is its ground, by entering into communication with freedom from without, revolts and now betrays unfreedom in such a way that it is the individual who in anxiety betrays himself against his will.⁵⁵

The demoniac fears being exposed and lives in a perpetual state of staving off that word of disclosure that would reveal his or her existence as a façade, of saying “what have I to do with you” in an encounter that, after all, can only be said to be transpire within itself, since the freedom the demonic runs from is, in the end, only its own. Considering that the self can never thoroughly rid itself of itself, this race to outrun freedom can never be, in actuality, won. Freedom, then, in the exertion it expends in efforts toward the

⁵³ Kierkegaard, 124.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, 123.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, 123.

achievement of its own annihilation, in attempting to convince itself that it is other than itself in the demonic state of unfreedom, is, nonetheless, always already on the move in the direction of disclosure. It is in this way that Vigilius can claim that “unfreedom becomes anxious, and thus its anxiety moves,” therefore involuntarily revealing itself in its tendency “toward mime, not in the sense of the beautiful but in the sense of the sudden, the abrupt ...”⁵⁶ The demonic thus shows itself through eruptions within which something striving to communicate itself breaks the exterior barrier freedom has set up to avoid seeing itself and thereby reveals (both to itself and to an observer) this exterior as façade, as fabrication and dissimulation, as mimetic disguise.⁵⁷ Although, the demoniac’s attempt to outrun freedom remains, in actuality, an impossibility, it nevertheless is a possibility that can be entertained from the perspective of an purely abstract stance of self-awareness, that is, one which avoids facing the abyss of its own finitude. The maintaining of a view of the self that sees itself only in terms of an infinite variety of unrealized possibilities is, I believe, definitive of the demonic. The demonic self’s effort to outrun itself is thus tantamount to a fleeing of finitude into abstraction that is always doomed to reveal itself in the sudden eruptions of concretion, whether it be a look, a gesture or a word, that serves to reveal its notion of the infinite, as a fleeing in thought from the finite, as false. Precisely because the self can misconceive itself *in abstracto*, can reflect upon itself as being comprised by an infinite number of un-potentiated possibilities thereby turning away from the realization that *in concreto* “truth is for the

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, 132.

⁵⁷ These interruptions in continuity are not limited to direct linguistic confessionals but can take the form of gestural innuendo: “The disclosure may declare itself in words, as when the unhappy man ends by thrusting his concealed secret upon every one. It may declare itself in facial expression, in a glance, because there is a glance by which one involuntarily reveals what is concealed.” Kierkegaard, 129.

particular individual only as he himself produces it in action,”⁵⁸ and we might now say, in speech also, the human self can display the peculiar desire of not wishing to be what it is, of “desiring in one way or another to be more than the empirical, historically qualified, finite individuality that he is.”⁵⁹

The demoniac, thus, in conceiving of himself in terms of a false infinite easily falls into the trap of believing that any communication as disclosure, any word or act that commits one to the finite and the concrete, is a defilement of its own self – the self as possibility revealing itself to “multi-tongued” reflection in anxiety is anxious over the death of unrealized possibilities that any actualization (act of concrete freedom) of a possibility necessarily entails.⁶⁰ The “good,” therefore, that the demonic is anxious about is nothing other than the actuality of freedom found in owning the ambiguity of itself as anxious – a “good” that accordingly can appear as terrifying. Understood in this way, according to Fenves, the demonic becomes revelatory of:

... the unease of *communicerende* itself. The demonic insists on this: communication no longer serves a sacred communion but serves to sully the speaking self – a self, however, that “is” only in making itself common, making itself other, defiling itself even as it upholds the law.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, 138.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, 143.

⁶⁰ I am borrowing the term “multi-tongued reflection” from *Either/Or*, although another term from this same work, namely, “speculative-comprehension” would serve the purposes here just as well. The parallel that this word choice draws between the demoniac and the state of the esthete in *Either/Or* is intentional and is intended to open up a comparison of the two. Such an analysis, however, will have to wait as it is beyond the scope of this current essay. Suffice it to say that for now this parallel seems to me to be correct in that the judge in the second volume of *Either/Or* encourages the young esthete of the necessity of choosing himself concretely rather than abstractly. Cf. the first volume of *Either/Or*, 39 and 309 for examples of the use of “multi-tongued reflection” and “speculative comprehension.” Cf. the second volume, 250-251, for one of the many examples of the judge’s encouragement of concretion.

⁶¹ Peter Fenves, “Chatter:” *Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 107.

In other words, the demonic becomes an attempt to paralyze the movement of the self toward disclosure with the thought that, in order for it to be, it must, in a sense, cease to be; that is, it must become less than how it would imagine itself to be within an abstract or aesthetic viewpoint. Some-thing, which, in actuality, is only a not, must perish for the self to become a self through communion in freedom with itself. Therefore freedom is mistaken for a sudden death and unfreedom is, in turn, posited as a replacement that sustains the illusory life of a freedom understood only abstractly. The meaning of Vigilius' example of the demoniac in the New Testament, who not only says to Christ and the freedom he represented "what have I to do with you" but "continues by suggesting that Christ has come to destroy him,"⁶² now becomes apparent: the demoniac falsely apprehends his or her anxiety in the face of freedom as expressive of the onset of his or her own demise while it is nothing but the onset of the possibility of the redemption of the self that is showing itself in anxiety.⁶³

The concept of the demonic, as a concept and as a state within which the "individuality wants to make himself into an abstraction,"⁶⁴ stands in contrast to and thus provides, so to speak, the relief that allows for the possibility of a glimpse of that which is beyond conceptual abstraction, namely, that unity of state and movement that is the

⁶² Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 124.

⁶³ The following passage from *Fear and Trembling* serves both to elucidate and complicate this idea: "As soon as the individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal." Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 54. If this assertion of the self into the universal (the ethical, the social) is analogous to the act of disclosure under discussion here then the demoniac might be right in fearing it since it would, it seems, entail a repetition of sin. Yet, additionally, it seems that this must be undergone so that the individual in the state of sin is capable of owning this sin as her own – salvation as freedom might reside in this act of ownership.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, 141.

qualitative leap of freedom. The words that are used by Vigilius as indicators of this activity of concrete subjectivity, which can only be shown indirectly, are “inwardness” and “earnestness.” In defying conceptualization, these words enact a referential movement that points to nowhere or no one else but the individual reader of this work. Inwardness is revealed as the very concrete activity that allows for the concept of the demonic to be pushed outside of its limits and as simultaneously comprising the limit point that is thereby exposed – this activity of a concrete individuality that is a form of “self-consciousness, but the self-consciousness that is so concrete that no author, not even the one with the greatest power of description, has ever been able to describe ... although every human being is such a one.”⁶⁵ I can see no reason to doubt our author’s “power of description” as revealed in his treatment of the demonic state; moreover, I would go on to say that such conceptual description has stretched the limitations of discourse to the extent that the activity of the self behind this discourse has become a mirror. A mirror within which we begin to recognize ourselves as living through a mis-recognition of ourselves, within which, that is, we begin to see our own self’s collusion with the abstraction of the demonic and thus our own self’s failure to own its own ineffable concretion, which is, as we have seen, intimately connected to its ambiguous relation of dependence on language.

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, 143.

iii. Indirect Communication as the Work of Freedom

Immediacy is reality; language is ideality; consciousness is contradiction. The moment I make a statement about reality, contradiction is present, for what I say is ideality (Søren Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*).⁶⁶

If language, as ideal, holds the subject who speaks it outside of the possibility of universal self-transparency, then, would it not be possible to conceive of the flight of the demoniac away from facing the ambiguity of a freedom suspended between the concretion of “reality” and the “ideality” of its expression as the consequence of a freedom that only discovers itself caught in the net of language’s finitude? Could the demonic dependency upon an abstract frame of self-reference, its apparent attempt to escape the ambiguity of its finitude, be said to represent not the exceptional but the conditional state of the linguistic subject? Is not the mis-recognition of ourselves characteristic of the demonic state, our tendency, that is, to follow the movement of idealization reflected by the formation of linguistic meaning by correspondingly idealizing the concrete event of our own freedom into an empty form of abstraction, in some way unavoidable? If there is no self-knowledge and, thus, no conception of self-hood as such independent from the idealized form it receives by means of the communicative operations of language, and if, at the same time, there is nonetheless the awareness, given through anxiety, of this dependency on idealization being itself dependent upon the nothingness of possibility over against which it operates but cannot directly express, then does not communication as freedom, as the free disclosure of freedom itself, become, nothing less than a task in impossibility? To escape the

⁶⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 168.

falsifications of the demoniac's flight into abstraction, would this not be only conceivable as a veritable escape from the working of language itself? To escape, that is, the indirect and circuitous route of having to pass through the ideal meanings embodied in words and concepts that every particular and concrete effort to communicate must pass? Has the presentation of the intertwining of freedom and communication in *The Concept of Anxiety* succeeded as a task of communication itself? Freedom, the change in qualitative state evidenced only through the nothingness lying at the heart of anxiety, has not, nor could it have been, conceptualized in this work – yet, has it not, notwithstanding the inevitable failure involved in doing so, not attempted this act of impossible conceptualization? And would it not be possible, then, to say that this proliferation of concepts that fails to conceptualize its own free activity, has nonetheless succeeded by putting on display the very nothingness of freedom as its work? To quote Fenves once again:

Freedom, as the secret, cannot be communicated, but it alone makes possible communication as the communication of its own impossibility. Since freedom cannot be communicated, however, it becomes an *ordeal* to do so – a trial, a parting, an imparting, a taking apart ... Yet, the singular law of communication states that nothing, not even freedom, cannot *not* be communicated.⁶⁷

This secret might now be seen to be the finitude of a freedom bound as it is to its concrete occurrence as but a fragment of linguistic expression. If the conveyance of this secret is the “truth” of freedom as “*communicerende*,” can we not then say that, at least to the extent that the effort involved in struggling with this work's complexities produces an anxiety in the reader that is an affective point of contact with the nothing of freedom, this

⁶⁷ Fenves, “Chatter:” *Language and History in Kierkegaard*, 149.

text can be said to succeed. I think so, but only if such a “truth” that remains secretive is seen to be inseparable from the work of communication, here, the work of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, that is, the means of its delivery. If this is the case, then there is not method to the so called “methodology” of “indirect communication,” rather we have here a showing of a paradoxical indirection present in any and all efforts to communicate at all. Should we not, then, in our efforts to comprehend Kierkegaard’s texts, resist the demonic temptations of structuring them around an abstract principle of unification, a “truth,” that makes of this showing simply a ploy, a clever use of language that assumes an authority over its operations that the texts themselves never claim?

Excursus B: Adorno's Kant in *Negative Dialectics*

For Adorno, the revolutionary impact of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* must be understood to extend beyond its epistemological import "to the faithfulness with which it registered the state of the experience of consciousness." Ultimately, according to Adorno, the motivation behind the modern project of Kantian critique is found in the need to give an account of what he terms the "metaphysics" of experience. Adorno understands this foundational work of modern philosophy to be more than a theory validating scientific judgments separating "valid cognition" from its invalid, that is, metaphysical, forms. While the medium of Kant's project is epistemological reflection, the answers he provides to the "so-called metaphysical questions" are far from being "metaphysically neutral." The metaphysical questions simply should not be asked given that valid cognition is restricted to possible experience and that experience of the absolute is, strictly speaking, impossible. Adorno notes that the idealism to follow in Kant's wake stressed that in denying objectively valid cognition of the absolute in this way, Kant himself necessarily is making an absolute judgment. In distinction from any form of idealism that would take this insight to grant permission, so to speak, to make of the absolute the subject matter of cognition, Adorno suggests that Kant was clearly aware of the self-undermining character of his brand of critical thought. Consciousness as reason experiences itself as bound to the paradoxical. If it wishes to not drown, it must carve for itself an island of cognitive validity while acknowledging its ultimate placement upon the antinomical sea of the noumenal. Adorno notes that while Kant's position is

“antipositivistic,” he does not “spurn the comfort that a man might make himself at home in the narrow domain left to reason by the critique of the faculty of reason.”⁶⁸

Adorno sums up Hegel’s critique of Kant well:

... letting reason judge whether it had passed the bounds of possible experience, and whether it was free to do so, presupposes already that there is a position beyond the realms separated on the Kantian map, that there is a court of last resort, so to speak.⁶⁹

To this effect, he footnotes Hegel:

... great store is set by the barriers to thought, to reason, and so forth, and those barriers are said to be impassable. Behind this contention lies unawareness that by its very definition as a barrier a thing is already passed. For a definite thing, a limit, is defined as a barrier—opposed to its otherness at large—only against that which it does not bar; the otherness of a barrier is its transcending.⁷⁰

As a result, German Idealism, by Adorno’s interpretation granted a transcendental authority to an absolute subject or mind whose role it was to set the limit to possible experience by “producing the subject-object dichotomy.” In time, however, this metaphysical view of the mind loses its influence and the critical subject “turns into a resigned one.” For this subject, the absolute is no longer of any real concern. Reason comes to despise itself. As “the repressive side of criticism,” rational thought attempts to eliminate the imagination from itself and becomes, in effect, “a rationality tainted with irrationalism.” In short, rationality becomes the stranglehold that bourgeois common sense expresses over the real. This section of Adorno’s discussion ends with the claim that any discrepancy between the faculties of intellect and reason in Kant’s system should

⁶⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 381-382.

⁶⁹ Adorno, 383.

⁷⁰ Hegel, *Works IV*, 153. Quoted in Adorno, 383.

not be considered as “a relic of the older metaphysics.” It is important to recognize that the tension between the two “lies in the matter itself;” that is, it arises as a structural feature of conscious experience. However well Kant’s critical thought navigates (whether through or around) the treacherous waters of the antinomies it uncovers, the tension is never resolved, as it remains “impossible to endow the cognition of finite things with a truth derived, in turn, from the absolute – in Kantian terms, from reason – which cognition cannot reach. At every moment, the ocean of Kant’s metaphor threatens to engulf the island.”⁷¹

The systematic “metaphysical philosophy” of the modern era Adorno credits with having more “glamour” than the forms of empirical positivism that came to replace it. He notes that such glamour is not merely aesthetic, although neither is it exclusive of aesthetic value. The system building of modern philosophy resists being dismissively labeled “conceptual poetry;” it is not literature. In order to demonstrate what he means here, Adorno turns his discussion to the Kantian sphere of the intelligible. Kant’s intelligible, he tells us, is not merely a form of “Protestant apologetics,” not a reactionary move *vis-à-vis* the categorical exclusion of the absolute; rather, Kant’s postulation of the ideas of reason is said to be “an attempted intervention in the dialectics of enlightenment,” an act of reason that “hope[s] against reason” the secret of which “is the unthinkability of despair.”⁷² The significance of these statements, indicative as they are of a possible intertwinement of hope and despair, is not made apparent at this point in his discussion. As it is presented in the work he co-authored with Horkheimer, *The Dialectic*

⁷¹ Adorno, 384.

⁷² Adorno, 385.

of *Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*,⁷³ the dialectics of enlightenment designates the tendency of rationality to exclude, by the dialectical development of its own internal logic, whatever eludes the comprehensive grasp of the concept, an exclusion eventually enforced with violence. With the enlightenment reason begins to follow through with this process to the point of undermining itself – reason has become, in a word, irrational. Humanity’s attempt to escape the mythical bonds of ignorance fails as it enslaves itself to the new myth of the rational. The project of critical thought is, for Adorno, tantamount to a disruption in this process that brings the myth at the heart of identity thinking into view. Critical thought can be said to begin with Kant, at least in part, because in relation to “metaphysical ideas ... his own position remained open, in a grandiose ambiguity,” to their possibility, without “jumping from thoughts of the absolute ... to the conclusion that the absolute exists.” Adorno says of Kant that which is equally applicable to himself: “He disdained the passage to affirmation.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). This work is foundational to the school of critical theory and departments of cultural studies that were born out of it. Given its importance, it is odd that little has been said about the significance of the subtitle. Indeed, dropping it from citations of the book seems now to be an established custom. As anyone who has spent some time reading Kierkegaard knows, it replicates the title of one of his important works, *Philosophical Fragments*. Certainly, Adorno would not have been unaware of the parallel, and, given his intimate familiarity with Kierkegaard’s works, it seems probable that the suggestiveness was intentional. Perhaps it is simply an issue of translation; what is customarily translated into English as “Fragments” is the Danish word *Smuler*, which, while not incorrectly rendered, might be better translated with the English word “crumbs.” Adorno and Horkheimer’s German reads *Philosophische Fragmente* not *Philosophische Krümel*. Regardless, one point of this dissertation is to show how Adorno’s work embodies an attempt to communicate a fragmented form of truth; moreover, in doing so, it can be seen as an extenuation of Kierkegaard’s task of indirect communication. If this is indeed the case, then the fact that Adorno uses the title of one of Kierkegaard’s books as the subtitle of one of his own cannot be entirely an insignificant point.

⁷⁴ Adorno, 386.

Adorno then turns his attention to Hegel and his critique of the “so-called Kantian block ... the theory of the bounds of possible positive cognition.”⁷⁵ He notes that his critique derives from a consideration of the dualism of form and content in the Kantian demarcation of the phenomenal from the noumenal, the knowable immanent and the unknown transcendent. Human consciousness, within the Kantian framework of the categories of the understanding, the operation of which provides for the possibility of cognitive experience, is said to be “condemned ... as it were to eternal detention in the forms it happens once to have been given.”⁷⁶ Hegel contends that these forms, as it were, cannot be rightfully claimed as ultimate, trans-historical determinates of experience. Due to the “reciprocity between them and their existing content,” they must be seen to “go through an evolution.”⁷⁷ This evolution is the movement of the Hegelian dialectic wherein the object known and the knowing of the object are intertwined in a dynamic process; a change in the latter, a reconfiguration of the criteria of knowledge, does not leave the former unaffected – that which is known as an object changes accordingly. Moreover, this co-implication runs with equal force in the opposite direction: the criteria by which objects are known, the formal aspects of experience, here, the Kantian categories, are transfigured in response to changes in the object experienced, the content. Thus, Kant’s dependence upon a form-content dualism in his notion of the “indestructible block” between valid and invalid cognitive experience does not hold: “Once the forms are elements of a dynamics ... their positive experience can no more be stipulated for all

⁷⁵ Adorno, 386.

⁷⁶ Adorno, 386.

⁷⁷ Adorno, 386.

future cognition than any one of the contents without which they do not exist, and with which they change.”⁷⁸ In order for Kant to say that the content of experience is “only derived from the forms, not from the matter,” he must hold “the dichotomy of form and content ... to be absolute.”⁷⁹ Again, Kant’s proscription against cognition of the absolute is shown to be contingent upon the validity of an absolute claim, to transgress its own prohibition, to be a position that undermines itself in being stated. We should keep in mind, however, that, in Adorno’s estimate, this critique of Kant does not entail a dismissal of his significance; on the contrary, the import of Kant’s thought might reside here within his insistence on thinking within the awareness of this contradiction.⁸⁰

At points, however, Adorno’s critique of Kant is relentless and damaging. To the extent that the question of whether or not “metaphysics is possible as a science” is indistinguishable from the question of “whether metaphysics satisfies the criteria of a cognition that takes its bearings from the ideal of mathematics and ... classical physics,” Adorno contends that Kant’s thought, however unwittingly, “does little justice to the living experience which cognition is ... that it is incapable of doing what it sets out to do, namely, to provide a basis for experience.”⁸¹ While “mindful of his assumption that metaphysics is a natural disposition,” Kant confounds the difference between the how “of

⁷⁸ Adorno, 386.

⁷⁹ Adorno, 386.

⁸⁰ That this is in some way the case is indicated in the passage that follows his explication of Hegel’s critical reading of Kant. As he states, these two thinkers might not be as opposed as they seem. “His [Kant’s] anti-idealist doctrine of the absolute barrier and [Hegel’s] idealist doctrine of absolute knowledge are far less inimical to one another than the adherents of both thought they were; the idealist doctrine, according to the train of thought of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, comes also to the net result that absolute knowledge is nothing but the train of thought of *Phenomenology* itself, and thus in no way a transcending.” Adorno, 386.

⁸¹ Adorno, 386-387.

generally valid and necessarily supposed cognition,” which would be compatible with his acknowledgment of a metaphysical element of experience, with the “what of that cognition, its possibility itself,”⁸² which as “measured by the scientific ideal” deems experience itself to be impossible. There is something dangerously authoritative at work here in Kant’s thinking, for it contradicts “that which experience tells us about itself, about the change that occurs constantly in the forms of experience, the more open it is, and the more it is actualized.” In short, Adorno is claiming that here Kant’s intransigent adherence to the quantifiable constrictions of Newtonian physics as the measuring stick against which validity is to be accessed is tantamount to a radical devaluing of the actual experience of being a human being and the closure of the un-actualized possibilities that are contained within. What is at stake here, it seems, is stated enigmatically to be the loss of experience itself: “To be incapable of this change is to be incapable of experience.”⁸³ Following through with the theme of rationality’s transformation into myth, Adorno writes:

... the authority of the Kantian concept of truth turned terroristic with the ban on thinking the absolute. Irresistibly, it drifts toward a ban on all thinking. What the Kantian block projects on truth is the self-maiming of reason, the mutilation reason inflicted upon itself as a rite of initiation into its own scientific character. Hence the scantiness of what happens in Kant as cognition, compared with the experience of the living, by which the idealistic systems wished to do right, even though in the wrong fashion.⁸⁴

Adorno’s next move is typical of his critical method. He abruptly makes the claim that the abstract ideas of philosophy are rooted in social experience; in this case, “there is

⁸² Adorno, 387.

⁸³ Adorno, 388.

⁸⁴ Adorno, 388.

good reason to suspect ... the bar erected against the absolute of being one with the necessity to labor, which in reality keeps mankind under the same spell that Kant transfigured into a philosophy.”⁸⁵ As is also typical of his method, Adorno goes into little detail in regard to the articulation of the material conditions of these same philosophical ideas. He spends more time working with the ideas themselves. Even if the Kantian delimitation of cognition to an “imprisonment in immanence” is “part of a social delusion,” an explication of this delusion does nothing to remove its effects, the most significant of which is an experienced “separation of the sensual and intellectual realms.”⁸⁶ It is in this way that Kant’s thought “honestly and brutally condemns the mind [to its] imprisonment in self-preservation.”⁸⁷ However, coming to an understanding of the socially produced element of the split between the sensual and the intellect engenders the awareness of the manner with which “sensuality is ... a victim of the intellect.”⁸⁸ This comment foreshadows the coming discussion of the realm of appearances and the metaphysical experience of possibility that soon follows. If Kant’s thought expresses the enslavement of sensual experience to the quantifying operations of the mind as necessarily attendant to any split conceived between the two, it, at the same time, offers a glimpse of the possibility of a liberation of the sensual. While we cannot say or think how, we can “begin to anticipate” the possibility of the disappearance of the split – what

⁸⁵ Adorno, 389. It is equally characteristic of his method to make very little of the Marxist element of his approach.

⁸⁶ Adorno, 389.

⁸⁷ Adorno, 389.

⁸⁸ Adorno, 389.

is anticipated here “is freedom, not entangled practice.”⁸⁹ In order to shed some light on this anticipatory freedom, Adorno turns his discussion to the *Mundus Intelligibilis* of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

The discussion of the second of Kant’s critiques is initiated with a quote from the first. We read that it is with the *Critique of Practical Reason* that “Kant confronts the construction of his block with the positive construction of metaphysics.”⁹⁰ That “he did not pass in silence over its moment of despair” is apparently embodied in these words:

Even if a transcendental faculty of freedom may serve as a supplement, perhaps, to initiate changes in the world, this faculty would have to be solely outside the world, at least (although it always remains an audacious presumption to assume, outside the totality of all possible views, an object that cannot be given to any possible perception).⁹¹

Taken from a footnote to the Antithesis of the Third Antinomy, Adorno uses these words to return the discussion to the unresolved and problematic tension he finds pervasive throughout Kant’s work. The freedom “so zealously postulated later is here called theoretically presumptuous,” in a manner that “comes close to atheism.”⁹² According to this passage, “it would have to be possible to conceive as an object of possible visibility, at least, what must at the same time be conceived as removed from all visibility.” Reason, Adorno notes, must “capitulate to the contradiction.”⁹³ This paradox against which Reason must surrender applies *eo ipso* to the ideas of God and immortality, since

⁸⁹ Adorno, 390.

⁹⁰ Adorno, 390.

⁹¹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Works III, 313. Quoted by Adorno, 390.

⁹² Adorno, 390.

⁹³ Adorno, 390.

“these do not refer to any pure possibility of conduct; their own concepts make them postulates of thing in being;” that is, because “these entities need a matter ... they would depend entirely upon that visuality whose possibility he [Kant] excludes from the transcendent ideas.”⁹⁴ Notwithstanding the conclusion to be drawn from this, that the word “intelligible” when attached to the ideas of God or freedom “must not refer to anything real,” in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant “proceeds to a positive *mundus intelligibilis* that could not be envisioned in Kant’s intention.”⁹⁵ It is evident that the metaphysical ideas cannot be conceived as visual entities. Moreover, as Kant worked out in great detail in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, efforts to think of them as entities at all fail insofar as they become bogged down in the antinomies. Given that “a thought in which we do not think something is not a thought,” it is not clear what we are to make of the ideas that form the substance of metaphysics. While they are not “visual ... neither could they be ‘airy nothings’ of thought, lest they be stripped of all objectivity,” and “the intelligible would be devoured by the very subject which the intelligible sphere was to transcend.”⁹⁶ This option is said to amount to a “flattening of the intelligible into the imaginary.”⁹⁷ Thus, on the one hand, the concept of the intelligible does not correspond to entities, perceptual or mental, as Adorno states, it is not a concept “of a reality;” on the other hand, it cannot be said to correspond to something unreal either, in Adorno’s words,

⁹⁴ Adorno, 391.

⁹⁵ Adorno, 391.

⁹⁶ Adorno, 391.

⁹⁷ Adorno, 391. Such a reduction Adorno claims to be “the cardinal sin of the neo-romanticists of the fin de siècle, and of the phenomenological philosophy tailor-made to their measure.”

to “something imaginary.”⁹⁸ Neither a thing encountered nor imagined, for Adorno, the concept of the intelligible is that of the “aporetical” character of consciousness itself.

The intelligible is thought “in negations alone.”⁹⁹ As a sphere, it is that of the paradox of appearances:

Paradoxically, the intelligible sphere which Kant envisioned would once again be “appearance”: it would be what that which is hidden from the finite mind shows to that mind, what the mind is forced to think and, due to its own finiteness, to disfigure. The concept of the intelligible is the self-negation of the finite mind.¹⁰⁰

At this point, Adorno’s explication becomes quite amorphous and particularly difficult to follow. Yet, to not attempt to gather an understanding of his thought here at the very moment when it begins to slip into incoherency, would be to pass over a consideration of that which motivated Adorno’s project; namely, the “metaphysical experience” that he names here as the motivational force behind Kantian philosophy. Let us, then, attempt to follow Adorno as he unpacks this passage. In the mind, we are told, “entity becomes aware of its deficiency; the departure from an existence obdurate in itself is the source of what separates the mind from its nature-controlling principle.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the mind experiences its inadequacy to account for itself with the capacity of abstract comprehension. “To be a mind at all, it must know that what it touches upon does not exhaust it, that the finiteness that is its like does not exhaust it.”¹⁰² What is shown to the finite mind, what comprises that which appears before it, cannot be fully reduced to the

⁹⁸ Adorno, 391.

⁹⁹ Adorno, 392.

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, 392.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, 392.

¹⁰² Adorno, 392.

finitude of its own operations. The mind, aware of its finitude, undergoes experiential contact with its participation within that which is always beyond the grasp of finitude—metaphysical experience is experiential knowledge of the infinite. There is a moment of independence to be obtained “as soon as we insist upon nonidentity, as soon as all there is does not evaporate in things of the mind.” And “although its [the mind’s] moment of transcendent objectivity cannot be split off and ontologized, that moment is the unobstrusive site of metaphysical possibility.”¹⁰³ It is the “enigma” of “the negation of the finite which finiteness requires,” that “animates the word intelligible.”¹⁰⁴ The concept of the intelligible realm, thus:

... would be the concept of something which is not, and yet it is not a pure nonbeing. Under the rules of the sphere whose negation is the intelligible sphere, the intelligible one would have to be rejected without resistance, as imaginary. Nowhere else is truth so fragile. It may deteriorate into the hypostasis of something thought up for no reason, something in which thought means to possess what it has lost; and then again the effort to comprehend it is easy to confuse with things that are.¹⁰⁵

That is to say, we must not mistake thoughts for reality, as done for example in the ontological argument for the existence of God the modern resurrection of which Adorno attributes to Hegel’s philosophy. If we do so “our thinking is void.” Yet, if God’s existence is to be possible, we must avoid “the fallacy ... of the direct elevation of negativity ... into positivity ... even *in extremis* a negated negative is not a positive.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Adorno, 391-392.

¹⁰⁴ Adorno, 392.

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, 393.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, 393.

Adorno ends this section of his discussion by noting that Kant's verdict of transcendental dialectics, what he called a "logic of semblance: the doctrine of the contradictions in which any treatment of transcendent things as positively knowable is bound to become entangled," is not rendered obsolete by "Hegel's efforts to vindicate the logic of semblance as a logic of truth." He remarks that what "finite beings say about transcendence is the semblance of transcendence." According to Adorno, Kant was well aware, however, that "it is a necessary semblance. Hence the incomparable metaphysical relevance of the rescue of semblance, the object of aesthetics."¹⁰⁷ In the rescue of semblance, Adorno effectuates the antidote to "the socialization of metaphysical indifference."¹⁰⁸ Metaphysical experience is aesthetic, that is, it is of appearances, or more specifically, it is of the surplus of appearances over the subject's knowledge of what appears in such way that the meaning of appearance itself becomes of concern to the subject. Put otherwise, it is an awareness of the paradox that the possibility of meaningful experience resides within the actuality of its ultimate resistance to any meaning we may attribute to it. Adorno's metaphysical experience begins to look structurally analogous to the experienced aporia of the Socratic awareness of one's own ultimate state of ignorance before oneself. This moment awareness, moreover, forms a striking parallel with Kierkegaard's attempt to aesthetically communicate existential possibility. Adorno phrases it in a fashion strikingly Kierkegaardian: "The possibility of metaphysical experience is akin to the possibility of freedom, and it takes an unfolded subject, one that has torn the bonds advertised as salutary, to be capable of freedom."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, 393.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno, 395.

A distinction that can be drawn between Adorno's implementation of a negative dialectics and the absolute other of negative theology is simply that Adorno does not use lofty words to signify negativity. In distinction from descriptors like Being or the Other or Absolute Alterity, etc., Adorno's dialectical negativity is never really named at all. My doing so here, in fact, by referring to it as dialectical negativity of an absolute sort, is an example of the very force of identification Adorno's thinking never ceases to think against. That a negative with a negative never add up to the positive, perhaps the central tenet of his Kantian form of Hegelian dialectics, is something that his thought does not argue directly, but puts on display by making of itself an aesthetic performance.¹¹⁰ Thus the importance of the experiential dimension of Adorno's writings, the means by which it seeks to make of its aesthetic form an indistinguishable element of its theoretical content, seems directly related to Adorno's implementation and radical extension of Kant's prohibition of the attainment of knowledge beyond the phenomenal. The enforcement of the prohibition is tantamount to the effectual openness of the knowing subject toward the noumenal. And this openness is nothing less than the precondition of the philosophical. Geoffrey Hale notes that, "in Adorno's view what makes philosophy philosophy is the openness of its terms to another 'reality,' irreducible to conceptual form," that "enters into and grounds the concept."¹¹¹ The experiential insight of the possibility of the metaphysical within the reader, which is to say metaphysical experience, is offered via its embodied insistence that within the negativity of non-knowledge is found the hope of the

¹⁰⁹ Adorno, 405.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 122-123.

¹¹¹ Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 41.

transcendence of freedom – the possibility of the latter is expressed only in openness toward the former. The experience of what we don't know is the purview of philosophy; the generation of this experience makes appeal to the productive power of the reader's imagination.

In the section entitled by the translator "Happiness and Idle Waiting," Adorno begins rhetorically: "What is metaphysical experience."¹¹² It is purely negative; that is to say, it is clear enough that even if it is of the possibility of the transcendent, it does not provide evidence of transcendent actuality. Whatever it may have been in the past, Adorno tells us, "it now survives only negatively."¹¹³ If the negative obligation placed upon thought by the Kantian block is to retain its critical force, then what must be resisted is the temptation to ascribe to metaphysical experience an ontologically pure content, to presume experiential access to an entirely non-reified dimension of immediacy, to predicate the appearance of possibility with the stamp of authenticity. Any critique of the reification of experience, broadly understood as the transformative understanding that makes of the qualitative the quantitative, makes of human experience a thing, risks overzealously overstepping the prohibition against the positive that is the precondition for the possibility of critical thought. In short, critiques of ideology become ideological precisely when they claim to be not ideological. The very concept of reification is born out of what Adorno calls a "wishful image of unbroken subjective immediacy."¹¹⁴ Adorno deems it of paramount importance to note that the content of

¹¹² Adorno, 373.

¹¹³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 142.

¹¹⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 374.

metaphysical experience is not one of this un-fragmented reconciliation of the subject with the world, but merely the experience of the suggestion of its possibility. Only by not “putting his [our] hands on what the experience suggests,”¹¹⁵ is the possibility of the suggestion maintained. Thus, metaphysical experience is not the experience of “immediacy against reification;” according to Adorno, to insist on it would be the equivalent of “relinquishing the element of otherness in dialectics,”¹¹⁶ and thus cease to be dialectical at all and thereby hold out for the possibility of a genuinely historical understanding of historically conditioned experience. We must resist allowing any excitement or joy undergone in the experience of the possibility of life enchants us such that we mistake what might be merely “surviving traces ... of life” with “the meaning of life itself.”¹¹⁷

This is not to say that these traces need be regarded as merely nothing; rather, as the:

Surplus over the subject, which a subjective metaphysical experience will not be talked out of, and [as] the element of truth in reify – these two extremes touch on the idea of truth. For there could be no more truth without a subject freeing itself from delusions than there could be truth without that which is not the subject, that in which truth has its archetype.¹¹⁸

The task of a truly negative dialectics is the expression of this truth. Philosophy, Adorno states elsewhere, “must always, again and again, proceed interpretively and with the demand for truth, without ever possessing a certain key of interpretation.”¹¹⁹ Let us

¹¹⁵ Adorno, 374.

¹¹⁶ Adorno, 375.

¹¹⁷ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 143.

¹¹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 375.

return to Hale's point that philosophical truth, Adorno's "truth content" of philosophy, stands in relation to a reality that is irreducible to conceptual form. Adorno's interpretative style of philosophy does not entail the attribution of meaning to this other reality in the sense of effecting a restoration between the subject of experience and the ultimate incomprehensibility of its experience. Awareness of the ultimate incomprehensibility of existence is, I believe, at least a component of what Adorno is pointing us toward with his theme of a non-restorative metaphysical form of experience. Perhaps, the element of the truth expressed by the irony of Socrates' unique form of ignorance is that the sustainment of the negative mode of non-knowledge is that which guarantees, or at least holds out for as possible, the attainment of a knowing veritably beyond opinion. According to Hale, the openness toward the unknowable required by philosophy necessitates that its objects be known only via an appropriative interpretation. This is what Adorno means when he states that "philosophy conceives the first result it encounters already as a sign [*Zeichen*] which it must decipher."¹²⁰ The task is not to restore or complete the open-ended but, for Hale, "to read and interpret in this open-ended friability a kind of 'truth' (*Wahrheit*)."¹²¹ That the elements of reality "remain forever incomplete and incompletable, subject to unpredictable alteration," ultimately "confronts the task of philosophical 'interpretation' with the possibility of its own aporetic paradox."¹²²

¹¹⁹ Adorno, "Actuality of Philosophy, in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Conner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 23-39.

¹²⁰ Adorno, "Actuality of Philosophy," *The Adorno Reader*, 31.

¹²¹ Hale, 42.

¹²² Adorno, 42.

Adorno's contention that the Kantian concept of the intelligible is the equivalent of the paradox of appearances revolves around the issue of the transcendent status of the object of experience. In his lectures on metaphysics, Adorno states with uncharacteristic candidness:

For one thing is undoubtedly true: I told you that, where there is no longer life, the temptation to mistake its remnants for the absolute, for flashes of meaning, is extremely great... Nevertheless, nothing can be even experienced as living if it does not contain a promise of something transcending life. This transcendence therefore *is*, and at the same time is *not* – and beyond that contradiction it is no doubt very difficult, and probably impossible, for thought to go.¹²³

I stated earlier that Adorno finds within Kant's critical philosophy a willingness to stand within a space of experiential aporia and, thus, a capacity to actively recognize the paradoxical truth of its own self-undermining. In Adorno's appropriative reading, Kant's thought is understood to seek to acknowledge the fact of *nonidentity*.¹²⁴ Adorno, however, does not follow Kant in the predication of absolutism to a transcendental subject. While "Kant's thing-in-itself conceives transcendence as non-identical ... in equating it with the absolute subject [he] bows to the identity principle."¹²⁵ In his recent study of the role of German Idealism in the development of Adorno's thought, O'Conner finds evidence "that Kant can contribute to the nonidentity requirement" of Adorno's critical dialectics in the Refutation of Idealism section of the first *Critique*.¹²⁶ For O'Conner, while it is the "material idealism" espoused by Descartes and Berkeley that is

¹²³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 144.

¹²⁴ Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann and Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 234.

¹²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

¹²⁶ Brian O'Conner, *Adorno's Negative Dialectics: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 20.

the target of Kant's refutation, it is not their idealism in of itself that is of concern but the skepticism that arises out of the "indirect realism" their idealistic thought displays.

"Indirect realism attempts to conclude that only our ideas or representations are certain, and it is a matter of insecure inference as to whether there are independent objects that correspond to these ideas."¹²⁷ In other words, the idealism that Kant characterizes as "the theory which declares the existence of objects in space outside of us either to be merely doubtful and indemonstrable or to be false and impossible,"¹²⁸ is condemnable because it effectively goes beyond this doubt and works within the space of the positive assumption that ideas are the constituents of reality itself. Or, in keeping with Adorno, here the force of the negative gives way to the closure of the positive; at this point, the openness toward the unthought that must be sustained in philosophical critique is closed.

The thesis of Kant's argument is as follows: "The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me."¹²⁹ Let us continue to follow O'Conner's analysis by looking specifically at the way he finds in this thesis Kant's allegiance to the non-identical. Simply put, what Kant wishes to demonstrate is that "the certainty of inner experience is impossible without perception of external objects;" that is to say, that the very condition for the possibility of the inner experience of representational consciousness is that it be of something other than itself.¹³⁰ Yet, it is precisely such outer experience that the form of idealism under scrutiny here categorically denies. Kant's argument focuses on the "most

¹²⁷ O'Conner, 21-22.

¹²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 244.

¹²⁹ Kant, 245.

¹³⁰ O'Conner, 22.

general characteristic of empirical consciousness, the awareness of the temporal sequence of one's experiences."¹³¹ O'Conner notes that Kant "means to argue, here as in many other parts of the first *Critique*, against a conception of self-consciousness as the arcane alleged awareness of an essential ego."¹³² Thus, against the certitude of the Cartesian ego, Kant presents self-consciousness as the awareness of the sequential ordering of events in time. Kant writes:

I am conscious of my own existence as determined in time. All determination of time presupposes something *permanent* in perception. This permanent cannot, however, be something in me, since it is only through the permanent that my existence in time can itself be determined. Thus perception of this permanent is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside ... In other words, the consciousness of my existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me.¹³³

Perception, in order to be ordered temporally in the way it is for consciousness of self, presupposes the existence of something unordered in time. But such permanency is not to be found within self-consciousness itself – that is, the eternal as such is never given as an object of empirical consciousness. O'Conner notes that precisely this is Kant's burden: namely, "to show that time determination cannot be achieved by any purely subjective source ... that the relative permanent cannot be purely subjective." Thus, he must deny to both the transcendental "I think" (i.e., "the transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness") and to the "modes of intuition" the capacity to provide the

¹³¹ O'Conner, 22.

¹³² O'Conner, 22.

¹³³ Kant, 245.

element of permanency required for “the possibility of time consciousness.”¹³⁴ In short, given that the subject at the most elementary level of the empirical is a “series” of experiences, it does not “possess the resources to fulfill the criteria of permanence.”

O’Conner continues his analysis into a critique of Kant’s argument. While, he contends, Kant effectually shows “that the idea of time consciousness requires some objects “outside me,” he does not demonstrate that we have “an immediate experiential grasp of them.”¹³⁵ To the extent that he believes he succeeds in doing so, O’Conner claims that Kant is “conflating the conditions of inner experience – namely, that there are object outside us – with inner experience itself, which is nothing other than consciousness of my existence in time.”¹³⁶ For O’Conner, Kant draws unjustified conclusions from his discovery of the necessity of transcendent objects for the coherency of inner experience. He writes:

The certainty of the existence of external objects does not derive from their being experienced as actual but is based on the idea that they provide the conditions of inner experience ... he shows us that we require external objects, but he does not show that there need be any correspondence between these objects and our representation of them.¹³⁷

O’Conner’s contention is that since Kant’s argument makes no effort to articulate the content of representations, but relies solely on an awareness of the contents of consciousness being ordered in time, this leads to an unresolved equivocation in regard to exactly how objects of experience are to be understood.¹³⁸ Are the objects of

¹³⁴ O’Conner, 23.

¹³⁵ O’Conner, 24.

¹³⁶ O’Conner, 24.

¹³⁷ O’Conner, 24.

consciousness best understood as “representations, or are they entirely other than representations, being things-in-themselves that underlie representations.”¹³⁹ I believe that here O’Conner is expecting a bit too much from Kant. If the goal is to demonstrate that self-consciousness presupposes as the condition for its possibility an immediate relation to a permanence outside of itself, then it is by no means necessary to establish the validity of any would be correspondence between the inner experience of an ordered series of events and the outer world of objects this series purports to represent. Indeed, it would seem that an attempt to do so risks falling into the solipsistic entrapment of the form of idealism that Kant wishes to undermine. That which is transcendent to consciousness, we should keep in mind, both is and is not; that is, at least this appears to be one of the important lessons that Adorno draws out of his reading of Kant’s project. To O’Conner’s credit, however, he rightfully points out that what he takes here to be Kant’s oversight has the most significant implications for Adorno’s appropriative interpretation of Kant. In this regard, he fills out what he believes Kant’s position to allow:

The notion of experience always entails an immediate relation with an outer object: even the very possibility of inner experience relies on this condition. This relation is, in a sense, nonconceptual in that it is not a relation of a subject to an object with particular conceptual determinations. However, it is not a relation that lies outside the space of reasons in that its necessity can be shown by philosophical argument.... This arrangement of the nonconceptual within the space of reasons [is] a telling element in Adorno’s account of nonidentity.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ He goes so far as to state that in his review of the scholarship surrounding this well known section of the first *Critique*, he has not been able to find an account that “both explains what kind of objects Kant means and at the same time acknowledges the success of the argument.” O’Conner, 178.

¹³⁹ O’Conner, 24.

¹⁴⁰ O’Conner, 25.

Kant's refutation of idealism attests to the validity of experience the form of which is other than that of the conceptual. In essence, by means of transcendental argumentation, that is, an approach the endeavor of which is the uncovering of the conditions for the possibility of experience, Kant's philosophy evidences the reality of the transcendent in-itself as that which remains necessary for the coherency of immanence, while at the same time establishing the ultimate unknowability, that is, its resistance to conceptual identification, of the noumenal from within the phenomenal. For Adorno, "what remains venerable about Kant is that in his theory of the intelligible he registered the constellation of the human and the transcendent as no philosopher beside him."¹⁴¹

Part of what makes a negative form of dialectics truly negative is the hope it embodies in refusing to "rest in itself, as if it were total." Though placing, in Adorno's words, "the transcendent thing-in-itself beyond the mechanisms of identification," Kant's philosophy "registered some of this [hope]."¹⁴² By following O'Conner's analysis, we have seen how, via his argument against the insularity positioning of idealism, Kant's thought offers a validation of the non-identical as a form of experience that is irreducible to the conceptual operations of the mind. Perhaps, then, it is hope that forms the substantial content of the experience of the non-identical that Adorno refers to as being uniquely metaphysical. Adorno effectively transforms the epistemological question of Kant, namely, "how is metaphysics possible," into the question of whether or not "it is still possible to have a metaphysical experience."¹⁴³ When Kant's refutation of idealism

¹⁴¹ Adorno, 397.

¹⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

¹⁴³ Adorno, 372.

is kept in mind, it would seem that something akin to metaphysical experience is a presupposition of self-consciousness; in this way, whether it be understood to be of the super-sensible or the non-identical there is explicit justification for answering the latter question in the affirmative. Yet, from Adorno's perspective we have gone too far if we take this to amount granting such experience an affirmative content. Whatever it may be, it is clear that for Adorno, metaphysical experience is purely negative, which is to say that it is more akin to an experiential undergoing of the nihility underlying experience than it is related to a mystical knowing of that which is beyond experience. It is my contention that it forms a striking parallel with the experiential knowledge of possibility and thus of freedom that, as has been demonstrated, forms both the source and goal of Kierkegaard's aesthetic.¹⁴⁴ If this is the case, then the affective experience of anxiety within which Kierkegaard finds the evidence for the existence of the radical possibility that is human freedom might rightfully be considered as one possible instantiation of the negative experience of the metaphysical that seems to be the unnameable driving force behind much of Adorno's thought.¹⁴⁵ Adorno does indeed suggest that such experience is a contributing factor in the opening of a "perspective of possibility;"¹⁴⁶ however in his descriptions of such a perspective he never goes beyond his often repeated description of

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Chapter One of this present study for a detailed reading of *Either/Or* as revelatory of this character of the aesthetic.

¹⁴⁵ Oddly enough, Adorno does use the term despair occasionally in his discussion of metaphysical experience, a term loaded with Kierkegaardian references. He even goes so far as to say that "the secret of Kantian philosophy is the unthinkability of despair." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 355. Even more seemingly out of character, given the Heideggerian overtones contained within, is the fact that he ties metaphysical experience to the "open consciousness" of the human species that is tantamount to "an awareness of death." Adorno, 395.

¹⁴⁶ Adorno, 398.

metaphysical experience as that of “an impotent longing” or a “waiting in vain.”¹⁴⁷

Regardless, it is clear that if the poetic philosopher’s experiential knowing of transcendence is to be anything other than the experience of one’s own impotence (and I believe that both Adorno and Kierkegaard believe it thus), then this unique type of knowing awareness of the non-known as such is intimately tied to aesthetic experience. Adorno is worth quoting at length on this point and his words make a suitable ending to this excursus:

Art is semblance even at its highest peaks; but its semblance, the irresistible part of it, is given to it by what is not semblance. What art, notably the art decried as nihilistic, says in refraining from judgments is that everything is not just nothing. If it were, whatever is would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on men and things without reflecting transcendence. Indelible from the resistance to the fungible world of barter [*Tausch*] is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade. Semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.¹⁴⁸

Ultimately, it is the aesthetic that holds out for possibility: as Adorno states it in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, “that works of art are there ... points to the possibility that the non-existent could exist.”¹⁴⁹ This is not to say that the non-existent does indeed exist.

¹⁴⁷ Adorno, 374-375.

¹⁴⁸ Adorno, 404-405.

¹⁴⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

iv: The Aesthetic Dignity of Words

The text which philosophy has to read is incomplete, contradictory and fragmentary, and much in it may be delivered up to blind demons; in fact perhaps the reading of it is our task precisely so that we, by reading, can better learn to recognize the demonic forces and to banish them (Theodor Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”).¹⁵⁰

The fifth chapter of Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard, “On the Logic of the Spheres,” begins with a straightforward, albeit out of character, summation of the conclusions drawn from the preceding chapters. If there is any calm to be found within the conceptual storm of this text, if its seas stabilize enough to permit us the distance of perspective of the lookout perch, this appears to be it. The calm in the storm, its eye, as it were, allows the storm to be taken from a distance.¹⁵¹ This is the distance of perspective achieved via the paradox, the perspective that emerges when the distance necessary for the construction of conceptual frameworks is swallowed – the perspective of distance collapsing in upon itself. The view is temporary. If it is a reflective point of contact between that which has passed and that which is to come, we might apprehend the coming return of the stormy seas with some anxiety. Along with Adorno, Kierkegaard’s thinking “contests the identity of thought and being, but without searching for being in

¹⁵⁰ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in *The Adorno Reader*, 31.

¹⁵¹ Adorno takes the epigraph for his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* from Poe’s short story “Descent into the Maelstrom.” The passage reads: “The boat appeared to be hanging, as if by magic, midway down, upon the interior surface of a funnel vast in circumference, prodigious in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony, but for the bewildering rapidity with which they spun around, and for the gleaming and ghastly radiance they shot forth, as the rays of the full moon, from that circular rift amid the clouds ... streamed in a flood of golden glory along the black walls, and far away down into the inmost recesses of the abyss.” Adorno, v.

any other realm than that of thought.”¹⁵² This much we know: existence-truth is paradoxical. And perhaps what we have not yet understood: Kierkegaard approaches this paradox, according to Adorno’s reading here, systematically:

... the being of the self is determined functionally, as a “relation,” whose movements are to conjure an ontological “meaning,” but not in such a fashion that existence itself would become comprehensible. Accordingly, along with ontological meaning and the substratum of the self, that which has been predicated by the self – the structure of the qualities of inwardness, i.e., their “reality” – becomes crucially antinomical. Kierkegaard’s philosophy of existence is nothing other than the attempt to master or to justify – in thought – the antinomic of existence as truth content. And, indeed, it means to accomplish this systematically.¹⁵³

What we come to make of “the attempt to master or justify” will have a great effect on how to come to terms with Adorno’s approach to Kierkegaard. Mastery of the paradoxical is the task of Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere, while the justification of the paradox falls to the religious aesthetic. The critique of Kierkegaard that Adorno works out throughout his book, has as its target, I propose, the ethical dimension of Kierkegaard’s work whose primary representative is the pseudonym of Judge Wilhelm, the purported author of the second half of *Either/Or*. The productive element of Adorno’s reading resides within its pointing us toward a recognition that the critique he is leveling against the ethical is found to be at work throughout Kierkegaard’s writings, to be the work of the aesthetic itself.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Adorno, 86.

¹⁵³ Adorno, 86.

¹⁵⁴ This claim will be worked out in more detail within the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation.

The Kierkegaardian self draws transcendent meaning out of immanence in its activity of relating to itself via its relation to alterity.¹⁵⁵ It is the point of the transfiguration of experience into the poetic, the insertion point of the eternal. Yet, the meaning conjured up out of existence by the self does not render itself comprehensible. Implicit within Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard is the idea that the presuppositions of Kierkegaard's Christianity, primarily that of a positive theistic being, slips into Kierkegaard's notion of the unknown that the self relates to in relating to itself. Thus, to the extent that this prefigures experience of the unknown, that unknown is not, strictly speaking, entirely not known. Faith cannot be based on knowledge. It cannot be deduced from axioms. Yet faith is arguably a knowing, an infusion of experience with meaning. If the self is an artist, perhaps the portrait Kierkegaard paints is one of his responsibility to the content of the art. But this responsibility assumes the transparency of the ethical task. The ethical, however, for Kierkegaard, remains opaque, insofar as its central claim is that of the self's capability to provide itself its own meaning – to choose itself, in the existential sense. The aesthetic and the religious spheres are in agreement on this point that the self is incapable of choosing itself, at least without some form of divine or transcendent intervention. To become comprehensible to itself, particularity must submit fully to the generality of the conceptual. Demonstrating that it does not fully do so is a project our two thinkers share. Adorno's point is to demonstrate how the resistance to the abstract, the conceptual, by the particular, becomes, or at the least risks becoming, the mechanism of a redeployment of the abstractions of idealism. To the extent that language forms the materials out of which the conceptual is constructed, the "objectless

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*.

inwardness” of Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity remains beyond the capacity of linguistic/discursive expression. To the extent, then, that it is expressed at all, in is in the form of the paradox. Kierkegaard stands in this way for “the antinomic of existence as truth content.”¹⁵⁶ But the paradox is communicated and thus it points toward a knowledge of the existence of its source, a type of knowing that is, strictly speaking, of nothing.

Immediately following the introduction of the Kantian notion of antinomic truth as that which Kierkegaard’s texts aspire to convey, he lists the ways that it sets out to do so in a systematic manner, that is, by which “he succumbs to the idealist compulsion for systematics.” The paucity of such moments indicative of his own systematic approach, warrants that each one serve as a signpost for our further investigation:

... in that, for Kierkegaard, existence is drawn together in consciousness; in that the spontaneous act of freedom becomes the most inward determination of subjectivity; in that the image of the individual, as a “total” image, is subordinated to pure determinations of thought ...¹⁵⁷

Three ways Kierkegaard can be considered a systematic thinker: they all three somehow involve his participation in systematics as a “compulsion” of idealism. This is not the whole story. At the same time, to the extent that he wishes to think in such a way that does not fall prey to the pitfalls of idealism, to the extent that his is a project of thinking existence in such a way that any identity between thought and being is indefinitely suspended, he must do so from a space of disruption located squarely within the system itself. The following appendage to the above charge makes of Kierkegaard’s culpability in the crime against his own directive one of necessity:

¹⁵⁶ Adorno, 86.

¹⁵⁷ Adorno, 86.

At the same time, however, he must attempt to express whatever in his plan opposes the system in the form of the system: being, in which thought is borne; ontological meaning that is not identical with thought; discontinuities that cannot be derived from a deductive context – all this, however, is embedded in precisely that spirituality that functions as a system-positing force.¹⁵⁸

Kierkegaard's thought is representative of a force that seeks to posit a system, the force of understanding, of the rationality of the universal, but fails. It is the logic of failure that separates his own from the systems of those of whom he is critical. He deploys the understanding in order to not understand as a performance of the particularity Kierkegaard is well aware of being caught within this paradoxical bind. In fact, it is this awareness that makes his thought more the expression of idealism's inescapability, of the entrapment of thought and experience, the one within the other, of the positive hold the comprehensible/conceptual, as such, possesses over experience, even the attempt to think its own limits; than a positive formulation of any systematic idealism. Kierkegaard may indeed be a pupil of the school of German idealism, the two headmasters of which, Kant and Hegel, permeate every word of his own thinking; however, he is not studying there by choice. No doubt, he is a star student; and, thus not surprisingly a bit of a pain.

Deciphering the difficulty of Kierkegaard's problematic relation to the idealism his thought sets out to undermine is a task well suited to Adorno's style of thinking. Adorno's thought has style, that is to say that it is always stylized precisely because it maintains an explicit relation to the linguistic medium of its delivery. Of course, considered abstractly, this is to a large extent a mimicry of Kierkegaard's own approach. According to Geoffrey Hale, the real difficulty of Kierkegaard's work concerns the extent

¹⁵⁸ Adorno, 86.

to which it both articulates and founds itself upon the particular restrictions of a finite language. He writes:

If Kierkegaard's work exhibits anything, it is that language, because it is inescapably bound to its finite occurrence, can be understood only as fragmentary and that anything understood as meaning can be construed only as the very effect of this fragmentariness rather than as its resolution. At no point is it possible to offer an ultimate, coherent rationalization as its singular and necessary meaning.¹⁵⁹

If we wish to understand Kierkegaard, Hale continues, it would be best to begin with an attempt to explore the relationship between the “linguistic expression of the work and the philosophical ideas they are said to represent.”¹⁶⁰ Adorno's interest in Kierkegaard makes an attempt to do something quite similar to this; moreover, Adorno's own thought sets itself the same task of exploration. In his tersely formulated essay, “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher,” Adorno states that “all philosophical critique is today possible as the critique of language.” By this he does not mean that philosophy must exclusively “concern itself with the adequation of words to things;” but also, and more importantly, “with the state of words on their own terms.”¹⁶¹ Thus, the reciprocity between language and philosophy is intimate and extensive. Palamarek expresses the crux of the matter here well:

¹⁵⁹ Geoffrey Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 33.

¹⁶⁰ Hale, 33.

¹⁶¹ Adorno, “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher,” trans. S. Gandesha and M. Palamarek in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking*, eds. D. Burke, C. Campbell, K. Kiloh, M. Palamarek and J. Short (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 38. This is the first published English translation of this significant piece of early writing by Adorno. Given the high accord Adorno's thought self-reflexively ascribes to its relation to language and how much Adorno says here of interest, this translation is long overdue. Although it is no longer than a small handful of pages, its programmatic form of listing by number ten theses on the relation of philosophy and language makes of it a standout piece of Adorno's early work.

[For Adorno] language is the form that philosophical thought – however inchoate – must take if it is to express its insights into truth, knowledge, or being. ... There is an inescapable linguistic dimension to philosophical questions, not only in the obvious sense of their articulation and presumed communicability to others, but, more importantly, a linguistic limit that conditions the form and content of what can be thought ... concomitantly ... problems of language – such as representation, meaning, communication, expression – are inversely problems of philosophy.¹⁶²

The importance of language for Adorno's project of effecting a negative dialectical critique of experience, in short, cannot be overstated. It is out of the *operandi* of language that Adorno's thinking is born, and while he may push the threshold of its boundaries, he never attempts to venture outside the realm of possibilities contained within linguistic immanence. Palamarek notes that Adorno goes so far as to offer a simple definition of dialectics itself: "language as the organon of thought."¹⁶³ In effect, Adorno not only endeavors to deploy a dialectical approach toward an understanding of language, he understands language itself to be dialectical in nature. Thus, "like the dialectical thought it seeks to express, language must operate mimetically in the logic of contradiction and antagonism;" at the same time, thought must become aware of the way "language presupposes and gives rise to dialectical thinking."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Michael K. Palamarek, "Adorno's Dialectics of Language," in *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*, 42.

¹⁶³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, as quoted by Palamarek, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Palamarek, 43. Palamarek's article takes note of how a more attentive study of Adorno's reflections on language and the role it believed it to play in the formation of his negative dialectics will serve to bring to light the significance of Adorno in relation to the "linguistic turn" of 20th century philosophy. Two major trends of this turn, Palamarek believes to be following the lead of the early Adorno; Habermasian communicative action theory, whose focus on language enrolls it in "an effort to reach and coordinate mutual, intersubjective agreement;" and post-structuralism "where language as discourse serves as the central category of social critique." He also notes that a better understanding of Adorno's reflections on language will facilitate the ability to articulate how his thought serves as a "counterweight" to and "foil" against these very same trends in thought.

Acknowledging intertwining of the operations of philosophy and those of language does not preclude philosophical reflection upon the figurative function of words. Adorno approaches and understands the figurative dimension of language literally. Philosophical critique as language critique, concerned as it is with words “on their own terms,” has as its essential criterion what Adorno calls their “aesthetic dignity [German].”¹⁶⁵ However we choose to interpret what Adorno means with the notion of aesthetic justification, it is clear that it is Adorno’s insight into the operations of language in relation to the knowing subject that provides the motivation for his attempt to formulate an aesthetic form of rationality. We read:

The growing significance of the philosophical critique of language can be formulated as the onset of a convergence between art and knowledge. While philosophy has to turn itself toward the unmediated unity of language and truth ... and must measure its truth dialectically against language, art wins the character of knowledge: its language is aesthetic, and only then harmonious, if it is ‘true’: when its words are in accordance with the objective historical condition.¹⁶⁶

To establish whether or not individual words are in accordance with their material and/or historical conditions, one paradoxically looks for signs of their impotence. Such words are found for Adorno “in the linguistic work of art – which alone preserves the unity of word and thing against scientific dualism.”¹⁶⁷ Philosophy is assigned a paradoxical task. In his analysis of a longer passage from which the above was abstracted, Hale observes that it is not the collapse of one into the other, the aesthetic into the cognitive or the cognitive into the aesthetic as it may be, that is Adorno’s concern. Convergence is not

¹⁶⁵ Adorno, “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher.”

¹⁶⁶ Adorno, 38-39.

¹⁶⁷ Adorno, 38.

tantamount to collapse. Adorno's goal of the convergence of art and knowledge, in his analysis, is, a bit paradoxically, that of an infinite deferral of the moment of their indistinctive conjoining in a cognitive claim to be done with altogether the aesthetic and along with it, the historical and social embedment that conditions any claim to know. Language is, so to speak, the binding element that holds the knowing subject to its historical determinations, that binds the individual self to a finite capacity for expression, both reflexively and outwardly; at one and the same time it is language that holds the knowing subject open to the possibilities of interpretation, holds the individual self open to the radical indeterminacy of its own freedom – to possibility as such. Encountering this possibility involves actively acknowledging the aesthetic dimension of experience. As Hale notes, this “presents philosophy with the paradoxical task of seeking “meaning” where none can be permanently secured.”¹⁶⁸ He expounds: “philosophical critique as the critique of language has continually as its task the formation of meaning with and out of the very elements that, in and of themselves, resist or even destroy the possibility of meaning in an ideal – or as Adorno writes ... “metaphysical” sense.”¹⁶⁹

Philosophy is “presented with only one thing: the word;” although “this is not to say that the word dissolves into the one thing it could mean. ... the word in its ‘aesthetic dignity’ is always more or less than one thing.”¹⁷⁰ To be more exact, perhaps at the sacrifice of a bit of clarity, the word is always more *and* less than any one thing, which is to say, that the word, much like the individual who speaks it, both is and is not that which

¹⁶⁸ Hale, 43.

¹⁶⁹ Hale, 43.

¹⁷⁰ Hale, 43.

is spoken. If the demonic refusal of freedom is tantamount to the subject's refusal to be speak in the face of an awareness of this double bind, an awareness, as it were, that interiority can never be justified via its linguistic expression, nor avoid being precisely this unjustified being, then Adorno's desire to banish the demonic forces of the "text" of philosophy is comparable to Kierkegaard's wish to exorcise the demons of the modern, rationally understood, subject.¹⁷¹ While that much remains to be seen, the importance accorded to the aesthetic in both thinkers owes much to their understanding of the duplicitous character of language. Hale sums it up well:

As things, words have an existence irreducible to, if not wholly separate from, what they mean. As existent, they are also historical. This is the material given to critical evaluation. The aesthetic presentation of the word itself ... disrupts the intended completion of the word in its intended meaning¹⁷²

Language holds out the promise of universal meaning. When considered as "things" having an aesthetic dignity all their own, however, the lie at work within such a promise reveals the historical truth behind which it attempts to hide. The vehicle for the conveyance of such a revelation is the interruption of aesthetic experience, the insertion of possibility into actuality, that is the specialty of the artistic philosopher earlier named as the eroticist. The foreclosure of meaning here is equivalent to Adorno's refusal to allow the aesthetic to be absorbed by the intellectual, nor the intellectual to be fully eclipsed by the aesthetic. Meaning's foreclosure, in a sense, the failure of words, turns out to be the guarantor and source for the linguistic productivity of interpretative philosophy – again, of possibility itself. Hale sees this destabilization of intentional

¹⁷¹ Cf. Chapter Four of this study.

¹⁷² Hale, 43. My emphasis.

meaning that is tied to a word's aesthetic dignity as the means by which words "open up that meaning into temporality, into temporal existence, in which the meaning can no longer be guaranteed by any reference to an eternal value, an eternal truth;" but secured only as a possibility in "configuration."¹⁷³ In other words, words are bound to their material conditions of possibility by an aesthetic force equivalent to their own aesthetic dignity. Adorno's insistence that "language critique" is the equivalent of "aesthetic critique" and that this is the essence of "philosophical critique" is, according to Hale, directly related to Adorno's work on Kierkegaard.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, it is here that the connection between Adorno and Kierkegaard, especially in terms of the influence of the latter on the former,¹⁷⁵ is to be found in condensed form. "To understand Kierkegaard, Adorno insists, is to understand the necessity of 'language critique' for philosophy."¹⁷⁶

Keeping all of the above in mind, let us briefly return to *Either/Or*. Of significance to the present discussion is the following perplexing passage:

She [Cordelia] was an enigma that enigmatically possessed its own solution, a secret, and what are all the secrets of the diplomats compared with this, a riddle, and what in all the world is as beautiful as the word that solves it? How suggestive, how pregnant, the language is: to solve [*at løse*]—what ambiguity there is in it, with what beauty and with what strength it pervades all the combinations in which the word appears! Just as the soul's wealth is a riddle as long as the cord of the tongue is not loosened [*løst*] and thereby the riddle is solved [*løst*], so also a young girl is a riddle.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Hale, 44.

¹⁷⁴ Hale, 44.

¹⁷⁵ Although, a detailed analysis of this influence is not the primary task of this dissertation, it is a task that this dissertation has opened up as necessary, in this author's opinion, for the refinement of the current comprehension of Adorno in English language scholarship. Moreover, I believe that the work of this dissertation has demonstrated, put on display, this influence, certainly at least, aesthetically.

¹⁷⁶ Hale, 46.

¹⁷⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 330.

It is by the efficacious capacity of a word that a riddle is solved. We might wonder if this power of the word does not form analogue with the aesthetic force of language that both binds it to its material conditions and produces the opening within which expression continually takes place. The play on words implemented by Kierkegaard in this passage is lost in the English translation. A young girl is a riddle whose solution Johannes understands all too well will not result in her comprehension, will not produce the revelation of her secret. Developing out of the Latin *solvere*, the Danish “*at løse*” denotes both the meaning of the English “to solve,” and “to loosen, undo, unwind.” At first this might not seem to us as ambiguous as Kierkegaard would have it. After all, it is not difficult to see the identity adhering between the meaning of solving a riddle and undoing the perplexity which serves to make of it a riddle. However, the ambiguity toward which Kierkegaard is directing our attention is that the extensive range of the *Danish* word encompasses, if not renders synonymous, the notions of resolution and dissolution.¹⁷⁸ English is not capable of carrying the ambiguity over into its full expression without the use of two separate words, without, that is, stumbling out of ambiguity and into the paradoxical. Moreover, English misses the sexual innuendo that makes of the Danish *at løse* a veritable *double entendre*, at least within this particular context of seduction. It is important to take note an additional equivocation expressed through this passage. Johannes’ claims that his interest and enjoyment stem from both the “word” that is the “beautiful” solution to the riddle, while, concurrently, expressing, if not regret, at least dismay, over the dissolution of the “soul’s wealth” that transpires once

¹⁷⁸ The Latin prefix “re-” indicates “back,” “again,” “against,” or “behind” and the prefix “dis-” indicates “apart,” “away,” “not,” or “to deprive.”

the tongue of the speaker is let loose to attempt this treasure's expression through the impoverished means of language. He directly equates the young girl's enigmatic beauty, the possibility she embodies as her "wealth," to the infinite bounty of the human soul that is *lost* as soon as it is said. He indirectly expresses thus both enjoyment and regret over the "word" that is, at one and the same time, the means of the young girl's resolution of the expression of her beauty and the instrument of the dissolution of her possibility. That Johannes' enjoyment is of a contradiction is perhaps engendered out of his awareness that the serpent's tongue is forked.¹⁷⁹

The kinship between Johannes the aesthetic philosopher and the demoniac caught in inclosing reserve emerges into view here in the hesitancy both embody toward the disclosure of the self in language. For the aesthete, the coherency of the word undone from its aesthetic indeterminacy is the equivalent of the death of possibility, within which he is always in "repose [as] in a picture that is not seen."¹⁸⁰ In other words, freedom, as conceived and experienced by Kierkegaard's aesthete, is always only *in abstracto*, the freedom of the infinite possibilities of a dis-engaged form of reflection. His is the paragon of the "*liberum arbitrium*, which can equally choose the good or the evil, [and] is basically an abrogation of the concept of freedom and a despair of any explanation of it."¹⁸¹ It is in this sense that the critique leveled by Adorno against Kierkegaard's philosophy finds its proper object: namely, the aesthetic retreat from concretion into the mythos of an interiority hollowed of its material origins in history. As he would have it,

¹⁷⁹ Present in the draft version of *The Concept of Anxiety*, but absent from the published version is the following aside: "If anyone wishing to instruct me should say, 'consistent with the preceding you of course, could say, 'It [the serpent] is language,' I would reply, 'I did not say that.' Kierkegaard, 185.

¹⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, 331.

¹⁸¹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 200.

“inwardness attempts to still the external world that crowds in on it by anathematizing history.”¹⁸² The freedom of the aesthete in *Either/Or* is, at least to a degree, then the equivalent of the state of the demoniac in *The Concept of Anxiety* wherein freedom attempts to close itself up within itself only to find itself a “prisoner” to unfreedom.¹⁸³ The practical manifestation of this aesthetic form of ideal freedom is seen in one of the aphorisms taken from the *Diapsalmata* of *Either/Or* where he tells us that he had to resign his post as a schoolteacher precisely because he considered himself “completely qualified for this post,” and thus he had “everything to lose, nothing to gain,” by keeping his job.¹⁸⁴ It is the indeterminacy of abstract possibility that he apparently does not wish to lose – the aesthete is freed only insofar as he remains actively resistant to all mechanisms of identification, whether they be those of the social roles he refuses to accept or the operations of language within which he may find himself thus confined within the definitions adhering to any of a number of actual roles. In the following passage, the “action” that is identified as that which produces truth is explicitly tied to the *communicerende* resisted, in vain, by the demoniac: “truth is for the particular individual only as he himself produces it in action. ... If the truth is for the individual in any other way ... we have a phenomenon of the demonic.”¹⁸⁵ In one of the first aphorisms in *Either/Or*, we read: “How unreasonable people are! They never use the freedoms they have but demand those they do not have; they have freedom of thought – they demand

¹⁸² Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 35. Cf. Chapter Two of this study.

¹⁸³ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 138.

freedom of speech.”¹⁸⁶ The extent to which these two commonly held notions of freedom have, for Kierkegaard, a quite uncommon significance should now be apparent. For the aesthete’s perspective, the demand and/or expectations people allocate to their words to be unhindered vehicles for their self-expression epitomizes the naivety of the unreflective idle-chatter of the crowd. From the perspective of the aesthetic sophisticate, true freedom is found in the poetic development of one’s capacity for reflection: “to live in recollection is the most perfect life imaginable; recollection is more richly satisfying than all actuality, and it has a security that no actuality possesses;” for that which is recollected passes “into eternity and has no temporal interest.”¹⁸⁷ *Prima facie*, what the aesthete fails to take account of is the extent to which the coherency of his thoughts, supposedly free as reflective recollection, is contingent upon the determinate structures of language, purportedly, restricted by being bound to their particularization within the finite conditions of their occurrence. What the aesthete fails to see, in this way, or to take account of, is that the indeterminate type of freedom he cherishes is potentially itself a product of all that which he apparently disdains. Yet, there is much more to the aesthete’s positions than this particular face. Indeed, that Kierkegaard’s overall position does take account of this possible determination and thus expresses an affirmation of the resulting paradox of the linguist subject is exactly what Adorno’s treatment of him reveals.

Kierkegaard’s portrayal of the aesthetic has a truth-content, and not in any way, is it to be understood as trivial. Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard serves to bring into focus

¹⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 19.

¹⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 32.

the way in which Kierkegaard's texts never fully disengage from the disruptive effect of the aesthetic. This focusing in on the irreducibility of the aesthetic is achieved by Adorno's unearthing of the philosophical importance that language plays within Kierkegaard's deployment of his peculiar and aesthetically stylized works. Adorno even says, at one point, that Kierkegaard has a theory of language, one which he names as being "subjectivist-nominalistic," and that grounds his theories of communication.¹⁸⁸ When the aesthete writes, "one ought to be a riddle not only to others but also to oneself,"¹⁸⁹ he is prompting us to consider to what extent this ought is indicative of an "is." Perhaps, the riddle we are to ourselves as bound to the linguistic determinations of our expressions of self-understanding, world-understanding and so on, admits of no solution whatsoever. If we are indeed enigmatic presences before ourselves, perhaps we are, at present, without the means of becoming otherwise; or perhaps the task of philosophy as language critique is not the acquisition of knowledge, but the conveyance of awareness, that is, the communication of possibility. Inviting us to consider such a possibility, Düttmann states:

The solution is not knowledge over which one would have control after the destruction of the riddle, for such an impression would again produce another riddle. The solution is an experience without knowledge: the riddle does not dissolve into knowledge.¹⁹⁰

But what are we to make of this suggestion of a form of experience depleted of all knowing. I believe it better, for the purposes of this current project, to consider this to be

¹⁸⁸ Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 76.

¹⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 26.

¹⁹⁰ Alexander Düttmann, *Das Gedächtnis des Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 106-107. As translated by Hale and quoted in his *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, 191.

not an experience altogether without knowledge, but the paradoxical experience of the knowledge of non-knowledge. It might be helpful to keep the state of *aporetic* awareness of ignorance that Socrates so often produced within his interlocutors in mind as an indicator of, at least, the direction of thought being forwarded here. However, we must also keep in mind that this awareness is for both Adorno and Kierkegaard intimately coupled with the aesthetic, tied, that is, to the, in Hale's words, "paradoxicality of appearances."¹⁹¹ If Kierkegaard's philosophy embodies a theory of language, or even is rightfully understood to be motivated by such, its central insights, nonetheless, resist direct communication in language that assumes itself freed from this paradox; to the contrary, it demands to be communicated *via* indirection. The primary vessel of the indirect communication of possibility is the aesthetic, the thought-image, as it were, of *aporia*. The portrait of the religious poet painted with Kierkegaard's silent brush of anxiety is, no doubt, one of the most effective aesthetic vessels ever constructed to this effect.

¹⁹¹ Hale, 52.

Chapter IV

Reason's Sacrificial Productivity in *Fear and Trembling* and *Training in Christianity*

... the poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true. For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry or sing prophecy until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is not longer with him (*Ion*, 534b-c).¹

i: Faith as Transgression

I will give only one example of a slipping word (*mot glissant*). I say word: it could just as well be the sentence into which one inserts the word, but I limit myself to the word silence. It is already, as I have said, the abolition of the sound that the word is; among all words it is the most perverse or the most poetic: it is the token of its own death (Georges Bataille, *L'Experience Interieure*).²

... for with his little secret that he cannot divulge the poet buys this power of the word to tell everybody else's dark secrets. A poet is not an apostle; he

¹ Plato, *Ion*, in *Plato Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 942.

² George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Ann Boldt (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 16.

drives out devils only by the power of the devil (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*).³

One word whose utterance is tantamount to a confession of its own impossibility, silence, one word whose meaning is not other than the activity of meaning's defilement. A word equally perverse and poetic, for Bataille, in that it signifies only the event of its own demise; an event of slippage punctuating discourse with a disruptive intimation of the spaces of secrecy, of silence and darkness which forever remain resistant to the illuminating power of speech. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* as a text that puts into play a "speaking to us of secrets in secret,"⁴ is nothing other than a textualization of this disruptive power of silence. A *texte glissant* as it were, it is a project of transgressive writing of silence and secrecy actively undermining itself in being written. Not only is the ostensible subject matter of the book silence itself, specifically the silence both displayed and produced in the figure of Abraham before the impossible and absolute command of the sacrifice of his son, but the text is penned under a pseudonym who is himself a confession of silence, a one Johannes *de Silentio*, whose signature on the text is but a marker of its own authorial withdrawal (a withdrawal of Kierkegaard's authority and any authority whatsoever). Johannes *de Silentio*, that person who is the very personification of a silence that cannot be personified, nonetheless, can write in the same way that silence, although it cannot be said, nonetheless, can be spoken through a word that betokens its own death. Kierkegaard, in a marginal note included in the draft but excluded from publication, describes the author of the writings as "a poetic person who

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 90.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Whom to Give to (Knowing not to Know)*, in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 170. This essay is abstracted from Derrida's work *Donner la mort*, of which it comprises the third chapter; the entire book is available in English translation as *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

exists only among poets.”⁵ His writings can only take, as an encounter with silence written silently by a silent author, the form of a transgressive disruption of a discourse whose very operations are contingent upon the silence that they cover remaining an act of secrecy. In other words, it is a writing that operates on and thus exposes the limit points of the operations of language upon which writing, and all discourse, are inextricably dependent, but whose dependence they cannot speak since its remaining hidden is the very condition for the possibility of their uninterrupted operation. This encounter with silence through its textualization that is the writing and reading of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* is tantamount to an exorcism of the linguistic subjects’ unthought through “faith” in the substantiality of language’s ability to deliver themselves to themselves in a coherent and rational manner. It is an excising, then, of the demonic hold the rational claims to possess over experience.

Mirroring the act of Abraham “leaving behind his worldly understanding” as he set out on that terrible three day journey into the land of Moriah where all hope carried in the blood of Isaac was to be spilled on the alter of the absolute, the encounter with the unspeakable, with silence itself, transpires through the failure of *Silentio*’s own “worldly understanding” to render Abraham’s faith comprehensible. Try as he might, *Silentio* admits that he cannot understand Abraham, although such resistance to being grasped by the understanding intensifies his admiration of him. In short, what cannot be had is the “worldly understanding,” the understanding of the scholars, the framework of understanding shared by both professional and amateur alike, that is, by both the

⁵ Kierkegaard, 243. Note the irony in Johannes’ repetitive references to himself as not being a poet throughout the text and not being a dialectician, when, obviously, he is the harmonic fusion of both poetry and dialects referred to in *Fear and Trembling*’s subtitle: *A Dialectical Lyric*.

professor and any member of Kierkegaard's infamous "crowd" or "public."⁶ It is a type of understanding, we are told, that "amounts to the splendid principle that everything is the same"⁷ over which the knife of sacrifice hangs with the threat of difference, with the threat of silence's alterity. Thus, as if following in the invisible footsteps of Abraham's departure into his own silencing, *Silentio* and his reader undergo a parallel sacrifice of intelligibility, following Abraham, as it were, each step of the way further and further into the abysmal absent other side of thought. *Silentio*, as author, becomes nothing other than the silence, the departure from disclosure that is already enacted by the writing of his name. But, of the individual reader of this work, what is to become of her as she is subjected to this project of thought stretching itself both dialectically and lyrically,⁸ only to collapse on its own limits? Again, let us say, nothing short of an exorcism.

The structure of this sacrifice of intelligibility and of the exorcism it occasions is given voice through the three *Problemata* that comprise the latter half of the book. The first, "Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?" might rightfully be said, in essence, to pose the question of communicability resting at the heart of the text. The remainder of the book, including the other two *problemata*, serves, by means of variation, to deepen this problematic theme. *Silentio*, as a means of prefacing the *Problemata*, states that he is setting out on a journey where abstraction meets its limit point, where knowledge encounters non-knowledge, where language is silenced in the paradox of Abraham's impossible faith. The goal, in his own words, will be to "abstract from the story its dialectical element ... in order to see how monstrous a paradox faith is, a

⁶ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 85.

⁸ Cf. footnote five, above, on the irony of the subtitle.

paradox capable of making murder a holy act well pleasing to God ... which no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.”⁹ Although phrased differently, each *Problema* begins with a claim the substance of which is that “the ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies every moment.”¹⁰ The conceptual deployment of the term “the ethical” here refers to the realm of universal moral obligations that are communicable and applicable to all, without exception, that is, all of the time – the prohibition against senseless murder providing an all too clear example of such an obligation. Since language operates through means of the sacrifice of the particular to the universal and, consequently, thought itself, regardless of whether or not it is formed prior to its expression or its expression is taken to be its form, it becomes increasingly apparent over the course of the dialectical lyric of the three *Problemata* that the conceptual reach of the “ethical” extends to and is equated with the very realm of rational thought. What is evidenced is that a position that locates the justification for the moral worth of any particular human action within the bounds of the rational, as being capable of universal justification through an ethics that can be spoken, meets its threshold of applicability in attempting to provide an account, a justification, for Abraham’s faith. Any such position meets the silence, the paradoxical non-knowledge that is both the condition for the possibility of any knowing whatsoever and the perpetually threatening possibility of knowledge’s undoing.¹¹ As Johannes writes, the “moral systems”

⁹ Kierkegaard, 82.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, 83.

¹¹ Although in different forms, both Kant and Hegel can be understood as holding such a position that subsumes the ethical within justification afforded to it by means of universal, and thus rational, principles.

constructed from such an assumption contain not even a “hint of the terrors of existence and their nature;”¹² hence, it is the security such system builders provide in separating themselves:

by centuries, even millennia, from the convulsions of existence ... [that] betrays a strange mixture of arrogance and wretchedness, arrogance because they feel called to pass judgment, wretchedness because they feel their lives unrelated in even the remotest manner to those of the great.¹³

In other words, it is the pretensions possessed by or possessing the rational subject in the form of the assumption of being the author as authority, as one who is the highest court of appeal over the validity of moral action, that will be de-authorized, possibly offended and certainly silenced through the encounter with the unthinkable paradox forming the heart of the story of Abraham as he is poetized by our author, whose authority is only by that way of absence, of silence itself.

The “ethical,” which “has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* but is itself the *telos* for everything outside, and when that is taken up in it, it has no further to go,” is equated with the realm of self-justifying universal ends in relation to which particulars can only be understood as means. The linguistic subject, thus, is bound to locating its end in the conceptual in this way, the ethical task of any existing individual becomes “to express himself in this [the universal], to abrogate his particularity so as to become the

While Kant held that our actions should be governed only by maxims/principles that we would will to be universal law and Hegel held that the rational principles of action were embodied in the social customs and laws of the land and thus that moral action involved the alignment of our personal and particular inclinations with the universal inclinations embodied by these customs (*Sittlichkeit*), both thought that the justification of the moral worth of human action could be well understood. Thus, Kierkegaard’s project, at least here through the writing of *Johannes de Silentio*, seems bent on exposing not only the pretensions of the Hegelianism of his time, but the larger pretensions underlying the project of modern thought itself.

¹² Kierkegaard, 130.

¹³ Kierkegaard, 91.

universal.”¹⁴ This task of the self, understood ethically, is tantamount to translating the meaning of any particular act or desire into an expressible form by bestowing upon it the communicability afforded by the transparency of the rational. One must ground one’s thoughts and actions on the universal medium of reason and one must speak, give an account, disclose the reasons behind such a grounding in such a way that one appears to have a source transcendent to their being spoken. Any exposure of that particularity that itself speaks but cannot be spoken, or even any attempted thought of such an exposure, can only be experienced, spoken, or known as a disrapture in the continuity of experience, speech, and knowledge and, as a consequence, finds itself condemned and imprisoned by the universal that it breeches. Yet, the question posed, “is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?” questions by asking whether or not this understanding of the ethical as the universal can withstand such an exception. For *Silentio*, the stakes are high; we are told if it does not, then Abraham is “done for,” he can no longer be lauded as the father of faith, since, after all, “he should really be remitted to some lower court for trial and exposed as a murderer.”¹⁵ Simply put, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac cannot be justified via this duty of disclosure that is the translation of the particular into the universal, which is to say that Abraham is silenced, or as *Silentio* writes:

Abraham cannot be mediated, which can also be put by saying that he cannot speak. The moment I speak I express the universal, and when I do not no one can understand me. So the moment Abraham wants to express himself in the universal, he has to say that his situation is one of

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 83.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 84.

temptation [*Anfægtelse*], for he has no higher expression of the universal that overrides the universal he transgresses.¹⁶

Abraham is and remains, from the standpoint of ethics, a criminal. Between the ethical expression of what he is willing to do, namely, murder his own son, and the religious expression for the same exact act, that is, sacrifice his son, stretches the vast expanse between the immediacy of an incommunicable commandment and the reflective grasp accorded to its extreme particularity by language. This expanse is the space of both the severance and conjoining of the speaking subject from the words he is compelled to speak.¹⁷ That is to say, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is without reason; it is the undermining of the capacity of the universal to translate the particular and, as such, marks the limit point of both language and thought. Having, quite literally, no rational justification, from any coherent perspective, that is, from any perspective at all, his "faith" appears as madness: Abraham can only be "understood" by being sentenced to the corridor of inexplicability reason reserves for the criminally insane.¹⁸

Yet, Abraham is heralded as the father of faith with his willingness to sacrifice all hope, all "worldly understanding" and the reasons it provides, serving as the very testament of his greatness. And *Silentio*, therefore, makes the offensive claim that:

... faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior, though in such a way, that is the single individual who, having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now by means of the universal becomes the individual who, as the particular stands in an

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, 89.

¹⁷ "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is." Kierkegaard, 60.

¹⁸ "... but greater than all was Abraham, great with that power whose strength is powerlessness, great in that wisdom whose secret is folly, great in that hope whose outward form is insanity, great in that love which is hatred of self." Kierkegaard, 50.

absolute relation to the absolute ... it is and remains in all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought.¹⁹

If Abraham is to continue to be esteemed as the father of faith, then faith exists as a suspension of universal ethical requirements wherein the particular stands in a particular relation to an absolute that is higher, and thus somehow worth more, not lower and worth less, than the realm of universal and communicable ends. According to Johannes, Abraham's particular relation to the absolute expresses the paradoxical character of a faith that is only sustained on the "strength of the absurd" precisely because it is "absurd that as the single individual he is higher than the universal."²⁰ As absurd, read *ab-surdus*, that is, out of or from that which cannot be heard or spoken, Abraham's faith cannot be understood in ethical terms as a resolution of a conflict of comprehensible but conflicting duties; Abraham's heroism is not tragic.²¹ While as absolute, read *ab-solvere*, that is, from or out of the unlimited, Abraham's relation to his God is entirely outside and unlimited by any particular set of criteria of common justification. As soon as Abraham would try to mediate his situation, that is, as soon as he would even dare make the attempt to translate it into universal terms and, thus, render it explicable, he would be forced into the confession of being caught in the impulses of a murderous and transgressive desire that in seeking to place the particular, the inexpressible, as higher than the universal, the expressible threatens the very coherency of an ordered and thus rational world. In *Silentio's* words, no "point of contact" can ever be uncovered "between what Abraham did and the universal other than that Abraham overstepped

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, 84.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, 85.

²¹ *Cf.* the tragic hero Agamemnon.

[*overskred*, transgressed] it.”²² If we are to allow Abraham to maintain his position as the father of faith, then we have to face the thought, and undergo the anxiety attending such a thought, that his greatness stems from something beyond ethical value, that his faith stems from something possibly even beyond good and evil, to the extent, at least, that good and evil can be considered to be intelligible principles of thought. In other words, the thought of Abraham that this text uncovers by failing to think and that enacts the sacrifice of the reader through his/her participation in such a productive failure, is the veritable unthought as the transgression of thought itself.

In this way, the sacrifice of Isaac that Abraham is so willing to commit is paralleled by a sacrifice of the reader’s faith in the equating of the rational with the ethical, a sacrifice, however, that the reader of this text may not be so willing to commit, since it may be the equivalent of putting on the cloak of madness²³ and hurling oneself “trustingly into the absurd,” or rather being hurled, in this case, into the absurdity of the absolute by means of an encounter with silence. By uncovering the “monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham’s life,” the writing of *Fear and Trembling* uncovers the thought of thought’s annihilation.²⁴ The thought, now the *idée glissante*, that, like the word “silence” that slips under itself in being spoken, unthinks itself in being thought. This activity of thought unthinking itself through language is, according to one contemporary writer on the problem of Kierkegaard’s writing, an activity that is at “the

²² Kierkegaard, 88.

²³ *Silentio* describes this madness as being “more horrifying than the skull and bones that put terror into men’s hearts” and as “holding up the fool’s costume” for us to put on. Kierkegaard, 78.

²⁴ “But when I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham’s life, I am constantly repulsed, and my thought, for all its passion, is unable to enter into it, cannot come one hairbreadth further. I strain every muscle to catch sight of it, but the same instant I become paralyzed.” Kierkegaard, 63.

heart of Kierkegaard's thought" as a "holding open the relation to the absolutely other, [through which] thinking breaks with language. This relation ... can be held open only by a silence that effaces itself in the world of meaning."²⁵ Yet this absolute other, precisely to the extent that it is beheld as absolute, has no presence other than the activity of its own withdrawal and cancellation, which, we have seen, is nothing other than the rupture of a thinking that actively unthinks itself through an attempt to think nothing other than silence itself. Thus, the absolute other is this absolute silence over which the discursive is demarcated but only to be sacrificed and undermined through running up against the "annihilating" thought of Abraham's faith. In regard to the teleological suspension of the ethical, this limit is the paradox expressed in an impossible affirmation of the existence of a higher court of appeal that provides the *telos*, the purpose and end, to Abraham's act that is, itself, not contained within the domain of purposes and ends. Insofar as it is understood, such a *telos* is no ethical end at all; rather it can only be translated into the rational as the negative concept denoting the active subversion of the primacy of ethical justification itself. The question, then, of the suspension of the ethical becomes one of whether or not there is a purpose or end that is neither a purpose nor an end. If such a non-purposive purpose can be affirmed, such an affirmation only occurs at the collision point of thought with its own limits and the faith of Abraham is its exemplar. However, if such an absurdity cannot be affirmed, then there is no purpose to action or speech higher than that it receives in being known, in its being translated into the universal at the expense of the particular. Then the individual truly finds his *telos* in his capacity for the rational disclosure of the meaning of his acts in universal terms. But, it is

²⁵ Pat Bigelow, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1987), 101.

the latter that forms the very faith the rational subject has in its own capacity to be transparent to itself. Therein transparency, the author bestows validity upon experience by rendering it meaningful in speech, which meaning is the pretense that the individual has of owning the words he or she speaks. It is to the demonic hold of such rationalist presuppositions that this text of silence speaks by, first, involving the reader intimately in the process of reflective thought failing to grasp its object, here the faith of Abraham, and, secondly, as a consequence of this failure, by exposing the reader to the exorcising power of silence: that absolute otherness in the absurdity of the thought of thought's annihilation that this text enacts. This annihilation is that affective space of trembling opening up, quoting Derrida, before that "which exceeds my seeing and my knowing," while, at the same time, recognizing that this unknowable source before which I tremble, "concerns the innermost part of me."²⁶ In short, the exorcism of the demonic, understood as the rational, involves the admission, the confession, which is simultaneously a sacrifice, of the reader's complicity in the paradoxical and impossible situation represented in the figure of Abraham. It is a confession in that it recognizes the space of the exceptional marked by Abraham's faith in the impossible through his transgression of the ethical is less the exceptional case it at first appears to be, but rather the demarcating of the space of the sacrifice of the particular to the universal that occurs every time one speaks. Simultaneously, it is more properly a sacrifice in that, as a consequence, the intelligibility of the subject, its capacity to authorize a position via language, is stretched bare and rendered impotent on the alter of the absurd.

²⁶ Derrida, 152.

Clarification on this point comes from Derrida's treatment of *Fear and Trembling* in his essay "Whom to Give to (Knowing not to Know)." Derrida suggests that the case of Abraham is more a signification or marker of the impossibility resting at the center of the everyday. That he is more an indicator of a paradox we give voice to every time we speak than he is an exception, the only one chosen as such by a God; for Derrida, "[the] land of Moriah is our habitat every second of the day."²⁷ For, to continue at some length:

... the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned *a priori* to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death, and finitude.²⁸

Framed in terms of the conditions of the possibility of the moment of decision:

The paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to non-manifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret. It remains secret in the very instant of its performance.²⁹

As for the genesis of this condition of being paradoxically bound to remain beyond and before knowing while nonetheless being the knowing subject one is, whether it is the result of a falling and thus breaking apart of an initial harmony between the immediacy and reflection through the misuse of freedom, as Kierkegaard suggests elsewhere,³⁰ or is a severance produced by an act of transgression against the universal fundamental to

²⁷ Derrida, 163.

²⁸ Derrida, 162.

²⁹ Derrida, 169. Derrida's reading and irony is revealed here in his choice of the examples illustrative of his point that absolute duty demands the sacrifice of ethical duty. In attempting to fill my absolute duty to any particular other, I cannot help but sacrifice all the other others whose claim on my action is equally valid – every decision I make thus involves the overstepping of the ethical as universal.

³⁰ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

consciousness as such, a consequence that is of being embedded reflectively within language, as Kierkegaard also suggest at times, however we got here, we find ourselves suspended outside the secure comprehensibility afforded by recourse to the universal. We find ourselves as not ourselves at all, but rather as a movement of particularity that we are accountable for and thus undergo in anxiety as a peculiar freedom existing in the gap between this particularity and the abstract means it has at its disposal in disposing of itself through its own expression. We find ourselves under obligation to perform an impossible act of translating the particular into the universal, of attending to the universal when attending to each particular. We find ourselves, that is, as a task we can only fail to fulfill for “as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses ... singularity. One therefore loses the possibility of deciding or the right to decide.”³¹

It could be said, then, paradoxically, that to the same extent that the speaking subject is held in language, the subject is held outside of the universal acts of translation that language sustains and whose performance is nothing other than its own activity. The encounter with the silence involved in thinking that annihilating thought of Abraham disrupts this movement of translation by forcing it to collide with the silence it covers over. This disruption effects an eruption into awareness of the structural rupture between the act of reflection and the reflected ideal yielded by such an act through speech. This awareness, however, should not be misunderstood as being itself reflective; rather, such knowing of the un-knowable is an awareness generated by the contact of the efforts of the rational subject with its own limits. Through its own failure to grasp these limits, an

³¹ Derrida, 156.

affective, not reflective, space is opened where the reader of this text experiences the sacrifice of his intelligibility on the paradox he already is through the *stemning* of anxiety. According to Johannes, anyone who is convinced that the paradox is something easy to bear, that is, or one could say, anyone who is convinced that the paradox is something only to be “understood” reflectively as reflection’s limit simply has not “understood” at all. In regards to the paradox of Abraham’s faith, “distress and anxiety are the only justification conceivable, even though they cannot be conceived in general.”³² The non-conceptual, that which, again, “exceeds my seeing and knowing,” that which provides that affirmation of a suspension of the applicability of universal ends, that impossible affirmation of criminality, the affirmation of thought by thought of its own demise, of language by language of its own undermining, in short, the affirmation of the slippage of silence itself, which is the only possible justification of Abraham, and to the extent that we too find ourselves linguistically bound in the land of Moriah, the only possible justification of the sacrifice of the particular to the universal enacted with every word we speak, is evidenced only by the anxiety attending the failure of thought to connect with the otherness it strives to harness as a means of vindicating its own activity, now understood through anxiety as tantamount to the perpetuation of a criminal offense.

The doubly poetic and perverse temperament of silence, which finds its textualization as the production of the very fear and trembling pointed to by the work’s title, can now be seen to arise out of the work of transgression that the word “silence” puts into play. This transgressive force excises the demons of rational confidence who dare to fully play its game by entering the impossible project of a text unwriting itself

³² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 137.

through writing silence. The effect of these demons of the rational are cancelled, rendered null, in effect, silenced, if not slaughtered, by a force that is no less demonic than these demons themselves. If such an encounter engenders an exorcism of rational demons and our faith in them, it only does so through the transgressive power of silence itself, which, we are told, in its resemblance to the divine is the most powerful and dangerous demon of all. If we go further than ethics, than the comprehensibility granted to action by the universal, as it seems that we do, to the extent that we are held outside the universal in being bound to it, *Silentio* tells us that we will always “run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic; for silence is both of these. It is the demon’s lure, and the more silent one keeps the more terrible the demons becomes; but silence is also divinity’s communion with the individual.”³³ Only by the silent power of the demonic, we are told, does the poet cast out demons. And of the possibility of an impossible communication that would be a genuine *communicerende*, a communion with the alterity of the absolute, a communion in secret, about this, could one do anything but remain silent? Need we the reminder, quoting *Silentio*, “that he who expected the impossible became greater than all.”³⁴

³³ Kierkegaard, 114-115.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, 50.

ii: The Productive Failure of the Image

The Latinist says of an attentive pupil that she hangs on his teacher's lips. For lover, everything is a symbol; in recompense, the symbol in turn is actuality. Am I not a diligent attentive pupil? But you do not say a word. (Søren Kierkegaard, Letter to Cordelia from Johannes, *Either/Or*)³⁵

In his posthumously published opus *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno states, "All that art is capable of is to grieve for the sacrifice it makes and which it itself, in its powerlessness, is."³⁶ Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* makes the presentation of sacrifice attendant to the artwork explicit by making sacrifice itself the subject matter, the content, of its presentation. Forcefully conceptual and overwhelmingly aesthetic, at one and the same time, the imagery of *Fear and Trembling* enacts the sacrifice of the understanding against the paradox of understanding's self-awareness of its own particularity as embedded within the universal structures of language. Abraham's sacrifice of comprehensibility is the poetic transfiguration of experience with the speculative deployment of the imagination. Kierkegaard shows us our own ignorance, by involving us in the breakdown of the rational as it unfolds on the pages of the book, he enacts the self becoming aware of itself before itself (philosophical wonder/existential illness) as fundamentally incomprehensible to itself. He thus enacts an artistic shock. What *Fear and Trembling* presents as a constructed image of aesthetic knowing is the contradiction that in *Practice in Christianity* is developed as the religious sign of contradiction in the impossible figure of Christ. Christ cannot be represented, thus his image is the limit point of the imaginary and the comprehensible. The understanding and

³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, vol. 2, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 418.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 78.

the imagination fall out of their harmonic state of play, as the imagination represents the aesthetic, and thus the aesthetic is sensed or experienced as real, in such a way that it becomes an expansion of the conceptuality of the understanding, beyond that grasp of any specific concept we may use to explain, attribute meaning or understand experience. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant proposes the notion of an aesthetic idea as the vehicle of the transmission of ideality from the products of artistic genius to the sensibility of the particular individual, the genius being the means that the unknowable supersensible, the potentially infinite, has for its work of revelation. The representational imagery of the genius, understood as “the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art,”³⁷ provides this rule of art’s determination to the extent that the artwork communicates the proof, so to speak, of this rule’s indeterminacy. This rule will not be stated without taking the form of paradox, the contradiction, which, to reason, is pure offense. The finite is the infinite, the infinite is the finite as possibility only to the extent that the infinite is irreducible to the finite and that finitude always resists appropriation by infinity. This is a rule conveyed, if at all, through the failure of the representational capacity of the image to present it. Kierkegaard’s philosopher, *Johannes Climacus*, identifies the paradox to be the beloved of the thinker, the source of the “passion of thought,” and the principle at work in the motion of thought.³⁸ That beauty elicits the passion of the philosopher and directs his desire toward a truth that is other than of the type equated with an object of knowledge; for Benjamin:

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 174.

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 37.

Its [beauty's] brilliance – seductive as long as it wishes only to shine forth – provokes pursuit by the intellect, and it reveals its innocence only by taking refuge on the alter of truth. Eros follows in its flight, but as its lover, not as its pursuer; so that for the sake of its outward appearance beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect, in fear before the lover.³⁹

The philosopher love-struck with the beauty of truth, perplexed by that anxious pleasure attending the promise of possibility, that presentiment, of a “more,” an excess always expressed but never contained within and by aesthetic experience, impassioned rather than crushed before the paradox, will not have his love. She cannot be had, the truth, that is, without the attempt resulting in her destruction. The philosopher thus makes the sacrifice of his desire so that the object of his love, the ideality of the identity of truth and beauty, might be granted the possibility of her existence. The thinker as artist is born out of a love that sacrifices itself and, in doing so, initiates the journey of coming to know itself in a disclosure of its essential relation to truth. Art is the inexplicable suspension of a necessary act of murder. Perhaps, we could even say that the aesthetic philosopher's inspiration for the production of his work is generated out of his active recognition of the sacrificial fate of truth against his desire.

In order to experience the beauty of ideality, the aesthetic philosopher, in Kierkegaard's words, “wills the collision,” of his thought with the unthinkable. “This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”⁴⁰ Adorno characterizes the work of the dialectical philosopher as that of the production of images. The dialectical composition that is the writing of philosophy

³⁹ Benjamin, 31.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37.

seeks “to interpret unintentional reality by constructing images,”⁴¹ through the “production of images of the contradiction.”⁴² It is specifically the construction of the image of contradiction that confronts the reader in an intellectualized, insofar as reading is necessarily a reflective act, aesthetic experience. Images of contradiction succeed in their task of the communication of truth by failing to represent a truth that is, notwithstanding this failure, their content. To reference Benjamin once more: that truth conveyed as the content of the beautiful is a content that does not appear:

by being exposed; rather it is revealed in a process which might be described metaphorically as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination.⁴³

If Kierkegaard’s deployment of a strategy of indirect communication is rightfully understood to be more than a “method,” as it were, of conveying a specific typology of truth, which as truth, would exist independent of the act of its communication, if indirect communication is expressive of a theory of language the form and content of which are inseparable, then the means of this theory’s delivery is through the textual production of imagery that succeeds in communicating beyond language’s capacity to do so by putting the failure of language to do so on display. In large part, this is the mechanism that facilitates the text’s capacity for the communication of possibility, the existential dimension of Kierkegaard’s work that aims to heighten the individual reader’s awareness of his or her own freedom. While the truth of this freedom may have many pursuers,

⁴¹ Theodor Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy,” in *Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 23-39, 32.

⁴² Theodor Adorno, “Dialectical Composer,” in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 203-212, 205.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 31.

only the true “lover” can experience the suspension of truth’s execution, its salvation within the aesthetic, “can bear witness to the fact that truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret [of beauty and of its truth], but a revelation which does justice to it.”⁴⁴ Only the lover of the image knows the attainment of grace attending Kierkegaard’s impossible faith, knows that through his affirmation of the desire for attainment, the murderous impulse of this desire is sacrificed for the revelation of the beautiful truth; only love knows it is not a criminal. For, as Kierkegaard says, “the possibility of offense lies precisely in this, that it is the believer in whom the world sees a criminal.”⁴⁵

Adorno’s reflection on art points toward the indeterminate determining presence of spirit in aesthetic experience. For Adorno, what we relate to in the artwork is not there, invisible, occluded, as it were, from the possibility of its articulation. This is similar to what the Christian relates to in her relation to the figure of salvation, the image of Christ. His divinity is and remains invisible; the God-man is a sign whose meaning is incognito. In a work of art, “reality and unreality ... interpenetrate everything in art to an equal degree;” they are not related as “layers superimposed on each other,” but rather that a work of art is equally real and unreal is art’s constitutive paradox.⁴⁶ The construction of the aesthetic communication is the artwork’s expression of the paradox of appearances, that its appearance as art is the equivalent of its expressive embodiment of contradiction:

⁴⁴ Benjamin, 31.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 120.

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 279.

“the paradox of an artwork is that it appears.”⁴⁷ Works of art are appearances that claim to be something more than their mere empirical appearance, when, in one way, they are nothing but such appearance and, at the same time, works of art remain irreducible to the notion of illusion. Works of art both are and are not what they are.

An artwork is real only to the extent that, as an artwork, it is unreal, self-sufficient, and differentiated from the empirical world, of which it nevertheless remains a part. But its unreality – **its determination as spirit** – only exists to the extent that it has become real ... in aesthetic semblance the artwork takes up a stance toward reality, which it negates by becoming a reality sui generis.⁴⁸

In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard describes his concept of a sign [*Tegn*] in a strikingly similar fashion. What a sign is immediately, as appearance, is something other than what it immediately is; yet, what it is immediately is precisely a drawing attention to itself as, nothing but, that is, as nothing more nor less than an appearance of immediacy:

This is not to say that the sign is not immediately something but that it is a sign, and it is not immediately that which it is as a sign or as a sign is not the immediate that it is. A navigation mark is a sign. Immediately it certainly is something, a post, a lamp, etc., but a sign it is not immediately; that it is a sign is something different from what it immediately is.⁴⁹

Ideality is present in our experience as signs marking our path through existence. That an appearance, an image, appears as a sign is unrecognizable in that which it is as appearance. Indeed, when taking into account Adorno's thoughts, it seems an appropriate description of the communicative force of a sign that it stems from an appearance that undermines itself as appearance by drawing attention to itself as the question, as it were, of appearances' transcendence. A sign conveys what appearances

⁴⁷ Adorno, 279.

⁴⁸ Adorno, 279.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 124.

cannot by drawing our experience into that of the sign's indeterminacy; that it is precisely its status as a sign that can be neither affirmed nor denied with the assurance of certainty we have in our cognitive grasp of appearances. A sign is an interrogation of singularity, of the particular and singular subject, to whose articulation Kierkegaard seems to devote his work, and the provocation of whom Kierkegaard seeks through the artistic extenuation of the sign of his interrogation. As he writes, "the sign is only for the one who knows that it is a sign and in the strictest sense only for the one who knows what it means; for everyone else the sign is that which it immediately is;"⁵⁰ in other words, just a lamppost or an ordinary human being.

That the God-man is a sign [*Tegn*], rather than a symbol [*Symbol*], is indicative of the way that its essential character is that of communication, an active signaling, a call (demanding a response), an omen, a pre-figuration of what is not yet but may be, a presentiment, then, of possibility. To the extent that this sign finds a parallel in the aesthetic experience of the indeterminate heart of the truth in beauty, the truth in art, the work of art is comparable to this call for a response.⁵¹ As the God-man is a sign of contradiction, as a sign, it is a request for relation, for the affirmation of what is incomprehensible, the impossible affirmation of faith. For Adorno, similarly, the "artwork as appearance is most closely resembled by the apparition, the heavenly

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, 124.

⁵¹ The experience of call and response figures prominently in the recent development of a theologically oriented phenomenology. Most notable here is Jean-Louis Chretien's thought. He develops an entire phenomenology of the religious dimension of experience through structural comparison to the call and response involved in the experience of art, both for the artist and the spectator of the art. Art is the artist's response to an experienced call that becomes expressive of a parallel call and response experience in the viewer of the art. Cf. Jean-Louis Chretien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

vision.”⁵² Art is the appearance of enigma. NicholSEN points out that “for Adorno, enigma marked the point of continuity and discontinuity between the subject’s experience of the work and its nonconceptual or mimetic aspect.”⁵³ In the same way that works of art are, at one and the same time, what they are and what they are not, and in the same manner that they are the event, so to speak, of drawing attention to the inherent contradiction of their composition, so is the contradictory image of Christ. Kierkegaard writes:

a sign of contradiction is a sign that intrinsically contains a contradiction in itself. There is not contradiction in its being immediately this or that and also a sign, for there must be an immediate entity for it to be a sign; a literal nothingness is not a sign either. A sign of contradiction, however, is a sign that contains a contradiction in its composition ... there must be something by which it draws attention to itself or to the contradiction.⁵⁴

Unlike the ordinary “navigational mark [that] is a sign,” the lamppost, for example, that lights up and signals a direction, a sign of contradiction is not of something other than itself, not a reflective concept or meaning easily separable from its appearance. To provide an example of the latter case, the direction signaled by the streetlamp can be clearly distinguished by reflection from the lamppost itself; if I provided directions to you and used the lamp ahead as a marker, the way that the appearance of the lamp ahead becomes a sign is precisely by its meaning becoming something other than its mere appearance. Pattison observes that “the sign-character ... exists only for reflection and is,

⁵² Adorno, 80.

⁵³ Shierry Weber NicholSEN, *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno’s Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 154.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, 125.

in principle, always separable from the thing itself.”⁵⁵ We could discuss the lamp or we could discuss what the lamp has come to signify or both, the relation between the two, with ease. The same, however, cannot be said about the sign of contradiction, the type of sign that draws attention to itself as such, whose appearance, what it is, is indistinguishable from its meaning, from what it conveys or signals. If all signs draw attention to themselves, at least to a degree, the image of contradiction might be said to be a drawing attention to itself as the operative drawing attention of the sign, to itself as the construction of a sign, to the construction of the image: the aesthetic.

Kierkegaard’s sign of contradiction is of its own internal “self-negating.”⁵⁶ He states: “a sign of contradiction is that which draws attention to itself and, once attention is directed to it, shows itself to contain a contradiction,” although “the contradictory parts must not annul each other in such a way that the sign comes to mean nothing,” or become that “unconditional concealment,” the very opposite of a sign.⁵⁷ The sign of contradiction is encountered as meaningful; although, what it is, precisely, is the encounter with the failure of the sign to faithfully represent its meaning in image. This failure is double-sided, that is, it is both a failure of the sign to unify contraries in appearance, the infinite with the finite, the transcendent with the immanent, the temporal with the eternal, and the failure of the subject before the sign of contradiction to speak its meaning, to comprehend these contraries as singular, to put into words the simultaneity of the human and divine, for example, encountered in the aesthetic figure of Christ. Yet, the productivity of the

⁵⁵ George Pattison, *The Aesthetic and the Religious: From the Magic Theater to the Crucifixion of the Image* (London: SMC Press, 1992), 89.

⁵⁶ Pattison, 90.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, 125.

paradox is more than the duplication of the following insight: the communication of the aesthetic possibility of such a God-man is contingent upon the failure of his appearance to communicate more than a signaling of his own possibility – the impossibility he represents to knowledge. For, in what Pattison terms “the terrible freedom of response,” a freedom known only as itself, before itself, in anxiety, “the impenetrable unrecognisableness,” conveyed by an image of contradiction makes a demand in its beckoning forth, the requirement that freedom recognize itself in the markers outlining its path and feel anxiousness before the interrogation of the self they present and the qualitative leap of affirmation their appearance requests. The sign of contradiction succeeds in its failure, but by the very fact that it is there, as Adorno says of works of art, it “points to the possibility that the non-existent could exist.”⁵⁸ It is the sign, we could now add, of the possibility itself of transcendence in experiencing the failure of it to evidence itself, reveal itself, directly. If that which the sign of contradiction expressed, the God-man, cannot be presented in image, as something similar to the Kantian notion of intuitions of sensibility, nor understood via the understanding’s deployment of concepts and thus is, in essence, an impossibility, to what extent, then, can the sign of contradiction nonetheless be understood to succeed in its task of communicating, literally, the presence of God? The answer to this question resides in the affective experience of the individual subject. In the same way that a beautiful painting, or the sight of a beautiful person, may have as its effect upon me that internal sensation of movement I refer to as inspiration, the moving of my soul, as it may be, although to the principle of this induced motion I remain blind, the impossible sight of the God-man, I

⁵⁸ Adorno, 132.

know as the God-man, potentially at least, through my internal, affective response to his figure. Is this stirring of the soul the experience of erotic desire, of love? “Eros – it should be understood – does not betray his basic impulse,” to the extent that he “directs his longings toward the truth.”⁵⁹

Danger is essential to the communication of possibility effectuated via the sign of contradiction. There is risk involved in reading Kierkegaard, and one that goes beyond the enchanting allure of the spirit of adventure. The disruptive element in the communication of possibility that is both disorienting and interesting is the result of the aesthetic power of the image; its ability to move the single individual’s interiority is a danger that addresses the imagination. To those who, Kierkegaard, says, “seek out the danger ... of confessing the faith ... must appear as odd as [someone] ... with his head full of trolls, monsters, enchanted princesses.”⁶⁰ If we wish not to leave out the “distress and the agony and the paradox” of the encounter with the image of possibility, then the cost of our cowardliness is the loss of the passion, the spirit of invigoration, the creative force of life itself. “Faith is a marvel ... for that which unites all human life is a passion, and faith is a passion.”⁶¹ Yet, face to face with the paradoxical image that stirs the passion of the aesthetic philosopher, one finds the unavailability of the risk of offense. The sign of contradiction demands response. All sightings, so to speak, of the unseen, of the invisible within visibility, whether it be of a man, normal in all visible respects, like anyone else excepting the claim made upon us by what remains invisible within him, or of a girl, visibly, like any other, but unlike any other appearance in precisely the

⁵⁹ Benjamin, 31.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 251.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 67.

inescapability of the call of what is not, strictly speaking, appearing. The God-man, the beloved, the truly beautiful work of art, all, as appearance, betray the possibility appearances disguise exactly as possibility. As Johannes says of his experience of the sighting of Cordelia: “Have I become blind? I have seen her, but it is as if I had seen a heavenly revelation – so completely has her image vanished;” this image flees, beauty resists, the knowledge, the desire that would seek its possession; “she has fled, and the eye of my soul tries in vain to overtake her with its longing.”⁶² Before the sign of contradiction, I come to recognize my own inability to speak, to understand that which I experience. Perhaps, I also begin to recognize how my experience is structured through invisible idealities, by the invisible presence, ultimately, of the divine. Is it then that I begin to hear what I can neither see nor think, that I become a receptor via the speculative ear? A sign is only such for the individual. God spoke only to Abraham. The angel of God spoke only to Mary.⁶³ The divinity of Christ, we might imagine, presented itself only to the inner ear of the apostles. The transcendent force of the beloved is heard only by the ear of the lover. Once heard, the interrogation of the sign of contradiction effectuates a qualitative shift in experience that cannot be reversed by the force of the individual will, however much one may wish to leave out the “distress, the anxiety, the paradox . . . , [he] that has once experienced these images cannot get rid of them again,” without suffering the images’ “terrible revenge in a silent rage.”⁶⁴ Once the knowledge of the invisible poses itself as the question of its own possibility, once, as it were, it is felt as

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 323.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 65.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, 65.

such, there is no possibility of a non-response, only madness, despair, impossible longing or impossible salvation.

Let us return to Kierkegaard's analysis of the God-man as exemplar of the sign of contradiction:

the contradiction – and it is as great as possible, is the qualitative contradiction – is between being God and being an individual human being. To be a sign of contradiction is to be something else that stands in contrast to what one immediately is. So it is with the God-man. Immediately, he is an individual human being, a lowly, unimpressive human being, but now comes the contradiction – that *he* is God.⁶⁵

At this point, this much is clear: while the speculative unity, insofar as it remains only speculative, of the polar extremes within which human life finds itself, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the sensual and the intellectual, to a degree may become the object of dialectical thought, even if only the object of such thought's desired state. The same cannot be said about this contradiction of appearance in the sign of contradiction that is the God-man. Pattison states it thus: "There is no *a priori* contradiction in the speculative notion of the unity of God and humanity ... if this means that the totality of the history of the world and of humanity is conceived as the divine self-manifestation in and through time."⁶⁶ A non-contradictory sign conveys its meaning via the reflective activity of its recipient. As an appearance of a sign, it is an appearance for reflection. If it happens to contain a degree of contradiction, its expression reveals it to be merely accidental, a mis-reading, or mis-use of its force of signification, like, for example, to quote Kierkegaard's aesthete, "as it is when one reads on a sign in a secondhand shop: Pressing Done Here. If a person were to bring his clothes to be

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 125-126.

⁶⁶ Pattison, 90.

pressed, he would be duped, for the sign is merely for sale.”⁶⁷ An authentic sign of contradiction, in contrast, is not only so for reflection. That which it signifies, contradiction that is, cannot be severed from its act of signification, its appearance. It could never be other than what it is, since what it is as appearance is the contradiction itself, ultimately, the contradiction of appearances themselves. The contradiction is not for thought. More accurately, the contradiction is not one for thought only, but is experienced as pre-reflective, that is, as directly and affectively. I am moved by the image of the God-man as I am moved by the sight of the beloved; in both cases, the principle of the motions remain invisible. Is spirit, then, love? “He is the paradoxical and offensive unity of the divine and the human which reason cannot think and language cannot state directly.”⁶⁸ If a sign of contradiction cannot be seen directly, stated directly, or even become the content of reflection, how is it that it is recognized as the particular type of sign that it is? In other words, how does the image of contradiction communicate possibility? According to Kierkegaard: “the earnestness in this communication lies in another place [that direct expression], lies in making the recipient [of the communication] self-active.”⁶⁹

Essential to the function of a sign of contradiction is that it draws attention to itself. It does so as the production of self-motion in the individual. It makes of itself, and thus of its invisibility, its being other than itself, a conspicuous presence of its absence. It is in this way that the contradictory sign is known (experienced) as more than a simple

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 32.

⁶⁸ Pattison, 90.

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard 125.

sign. It is this particular set of intuitions not conforming to the conceptual, right here and now, affecting me with its presence, inserting itself into the flow of my experience as a beautiful disruption of its structured coherency, as an “aesthetic shudder.”⁷⁰ The sign of contradiction draws attention to itself, not by making of itself something other than contradiction, but rather through the paradox becoming the source of and inspiration for the movement within the individual’s experience of affective expansion of that experience out toward the impossibility of that which transcends experience. That is, more simply, that sense of vital wonder. As vital, the creative wonder of life is increased affectively and experientially. Less simply put, yet, concisely expressing the enigmatic heart of the matter, is Kierkegaard’s assessment of what draws our attention to the divine sign: that its appearance is a miracle.

The miracle essentially serves this purpose [i.e., drawing attention to itself as a sign of contradiction] and a single direct statement about being God. Yet neither the miracle nor the single direct statement is absolutely direct communication; for in that case the contradiction is *eo ipso* canceled ... the miracle ... is the object of faith.⁷¹

Kierkegaardian faith is not only of miracle but is, at the same time, itself possible only as an event of the miraculous. “The God-man is an individual human – not a fantastic unity that has never existed except *sub specie aeterni* ... [he is] the very opposite, he discloses the thoughts of hearts.”⁷² Contact with the good forces the disclosure of the demonic; contact with the miraculous figure of the God-man demands disclosure in the form of a response. Faith would be the affirmation of what is impossible; what is not there at all cannot be verified to exist even by the individual to himself. He will, however,

⁷⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 269.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 126.

⁷² Kierkegaard, 126.

experientially know, through affect, the inescapability of the request for impossible affirmation. The ideality it suggests, this question of himself as free, as over the abyss, runs throughout all of the intentional relations through which he experiences life. What would constitute an affective, non-discursive, knowledge of the truth of miracle? What type of truth would this existence-truth be? Perhaps of the type alluded to by Benjamin “in which the idea is given self-consciousness,” and as the philosopher’s task, “is the opposite of all outwardly – directed communication.”⁷³

As non-discursive, the sign of contradiction illuminates the limit of linguistic expression. Pattison draws our attention toward Kierkegaard’s analysis of miracles in *The Book on Adler*. There we find that “the true dialectic of the miraculous [for Kierkegaard] is the unity,” between the Christian and the Aristotelian viewpoints: that is, for the latter, a miracle as “a breach or a failure in the smooth working of the laws of nature,” and for the former, the miracle as “something higher than nature.”⁷⁴ The unity of the miracle of the sign of contradiction is that “it is precisely in the suffering (e.g. of Christ or of the martyrs) which represents failure from the point of view of a system of natural teleology that God is revealed.”⁷⁵ The communication of possibility, of the possibility of transcendence, takes place through failure. The presence of the invisibility of God is revealed in the failure of his attempt to show himself, empirically, through the image of Christ. According to Pattison, the aesthetic image of paradox plays a constitutive role throughout the entire spectrum of Kierkegaard’s writings, “the aesthetic as well as the

⁷³ Benjamin, 36.

⁷⁴ Pattison, 81.

⁷⁵ Pattison, 81.

religious;” in this way, the paradigmatic image of Christ is pervasive. “Even the brightest and most luminous of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic images will bear both the shadow and the illumination of the cross.”⁷⁶

It is this human being over there, in the form of love, who says I am God. This claim to divine authority, “its directness, means that we cannot comfortably dismiss it as a literary game, a thought-experiment.” At the same time, “its indirectness (its failure to substantiate its knowledge-element) means that we cannot evade our responsibility for interpreting it the way we interpret it.”⁷⁷ The authority expressed in the direct claim undermines itself – the author, as it were, vanishes into the appearance of its expressive contradiction in the very fact that it is this person’s appearing in front of me, not God, that is speaking the words. The recipient of the communication becomes self-active to the extent that, according to Pattison, “the communication of the paradox expects and requires the full activation of the freedom and interpretative responsibility of the

⁷⁶ Pattison, 94. This speaks poignantly to an interpretation that the religious is aesthetic and the aesthetic is religious and neither are ethical. On the one hand, Strausser puts into play the aesthetic and the religious such that neither is ever reducible to the other while each is always present in every word Kierkegaard wrote, thus, his writings become animated by this tension. On the other hand, Pattison is one of the very few thinkers that takes both the religious and the aesthetic dimensions of Kierkegaard’s writings to be intertwined to the extent, in some ways, of being indistinguishable from one another. It is difficult for commentators to see this move as anything other than the reduction of all of Kierkegaard’s texts to a unified religious reading. What cannot be fathomed, I imagine, is that the three spheres are not to be reduced to any one sphere, nor are they necessarily related in a developmental or hierarchical manner. It is not both/and rather than either/or in speaking about the religious and aesthetic spheres, it is not an issue of their undecidability, but rather the religious is aesthetic and the aesthetic is religious. If there is an either/or to be found in Kierkegaard’s world, then it is more likely to be between the life that understands itself as ethical but experiences itself aesthetically as involved in a religious relation to an incomprehensible form of ideality. This either/or is not about the choice of one, the ethical let’s say, over the other, the religious aesthetic; but precisely because it is not about choice, it is about the paradoxical nature of human freedom. As free, I am not free to be the mechanism of providence; that is, I am not able to provide the foundational meaning, the grounding principle, the rule with which my life then would become determined. As free, I remain tied to indeterminacy, uncertainty, fragility; as free, I remain open to possibility, capable of hope. Cf. variously, *Either/Or’s* Judge, Kantian and Hegelian morality, Adorno’s discussion of the spheres, and Blanchot.

⁷⁷ Pattison, 86.

recipient.”⁷⁸ From the standpoint of the experience of the individual the communication of possibility is undergone as “too immediate to be contained in words.”⁷⁹ There is no need for the objection that “it is altogether impossible to express something immediate.”⁸⁰ As this is only to state the obvious, to restate, that is, the impossibility that is the request made by the image in its failure for affirmation of faith. The miracle of faith is experiential evidence of the individual’s participation in something outside the experiential sphere of the individual’s conscious representations, but it does not present itself so much as force the question of itself, its possibility, upon the individual, in and within the individual’s conceptual representations. There is a vague, indeterminate, yet undeniable sense to the lived experience of the “immediacy of the sensuous,” that we undergo before the communicative image of contradiction. To some extent, this is the result of our being caught up, captured, potentially enraptured by the image in becoming a free and interpretive, yet necessary, element of the image’s construction. There is a sense in which there is no image of contradiction to be spoken outside of the one contained, in part, within my response to it. At the same time, that it is possibility that is conveyed, a-conceptuality, by the necessity of my response, is itself expressive of the central contradiction of the image, that one that remains invisible and inexpressive, and, most importantly here, once encountered, inescapable. (This is to say and refer to Marion’s notion of gift). There are suggestive parallels between the response required by Kierkegaard’s paradoxical imagery and the response provoked by the work of art in Adorno’s descriptions of aesthetic experience. Let us turn our attention to Adorno’s

⁷⁸ Pattison, 86.

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 81.

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, 81.

thinking on this topic with the purpose of further illuminating the movement of the subject's interior, the interior of individual experience, by its relation, to its absolute exteriority.

In Adorno's thought, art intimates a possible freedom, a not-yet that never could be without the annihilation of its own possibility as freedom (*nota bene*: another example of the paradox to which the expression of this truth is bound); this to say, the effective character of art is that holding open of the indeterminacy of existence that allows for the possibility of possibility itself. In his words, "the reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible."⁸¹ For those of us familiar with Kierkegaard's formulation of the affective state of anxiety as the marker of human freedom, this should strike us as quite familiar. For it is before the "possibility of possibility" that Kierkegaard locates the individual before the abysmal depths of his or her own freedom. Art is a mimesis of utopia. The beauty that art seeks to express is equated with natural beauty. However, for Adorno the positing of the concept of natural beauty serves to destabilize the distinction between art and nature. Natural beauty is not to be understood as that which I encounter as pleasant in my perception of a mountain range or in the symmetry of the petals of a wildflower, because "nature, to whose imago art if devoted, does not yet in any way exist; what is true in art is something non-existent."⁸² Adorno's position is not an appeal to an immediate realm of natural beauty. As such appeals, Jarvis notes, "merely serve to confer an illusory naturalness on the very history which is overlooked in such appeals."⁸³

⁸¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

⁸² Adorno, 131.

⁸³ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 100.

In short, while the mountain vista might appear as beautiful to me, to assume that such beauty is indicative of a natural truth transcendent to the historical determination of my experience would be to simply forget that the same view inspiring awe in me at this moment was more than likely the source of fear and trembling for earlier generations. Artwork imitates the non-existent. Since the non-existent does not yet exist, art must seek to convey the non-existent as pure possibility; it cannot convey possibility positively but only negatively. Art is, in this way, then, the means of the communication of possibility. The content of this communication, possibility as such, is known through the rendering determinate of its configuration form necessary for the experience of the object of beauty as art, via the interpretation of the indeterminacy that is the message. It is in this way that Adorno can postulate that “art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it. The paradoxes of aesthetics are dictated to it by its object.” To this effect, he quotes the provocative words of Valéry: “Beauty demands, perhaps, the slavish imitation of what is indeterminable in things.”⁸⁴

Beauty makes a demand of the imitation of what is not there, of the indeterminate as such; it makes a claim for the response of the one who is captured by its spell. This demand is the mechanism of its interrogative form of communication. In a way similar to Kierkegaard’s discussion of the communicative force of Mozart’s music in *Either/Or*,⁸⁵ works of art, according to Adorno, both are and are not like language. The excess presented over the subjective intentionality directed at the work of art, and the

⁸⁴ Adorno, 72.

⁸⁵ Cf. the first chapter of this dissertation for a detailed discussion of Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the opera *Don Giovanni*.

dependence of the indeterminate meaning of art being connected to form, are both addressed in what Adorno calls the language character of art.⁸⁶ For Adorno:

artworks share with enigmas the duality of being determinate and indeterminate. They are question marks ... as in enigmas, the answer is both hidden and demanded by the structure. This is the function of the work's immanent logic, of the lawfulness that transpires in it, and that is the theodicy of the concept of the purpose of art.⁸⁷

If art is language, it is analogous to a form of writing: "all artworks are writing, not just those that are obviously such; they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost, a loss that plays [as essential] to their content."⁸⁸ All art is writing, thus, in that it is the composition of hieroglyphics to be decoded as the determination of the infinite by the finite and expression of the inescapable finitude within which all talk of the infinite is held. In Adorno's evaluation, the cognitive character of art is language-like but distinguishes itself from any type of discursive cognition in that it is not productive of conceptual propositions or judgment. The truth-content of art cannot serve as the means of delivering a determinate message; this applies equally to the content of that type of truth produced by the philosopher. The truth conveyed by a work of art "adheres in the determinate negation of untruth."⁸⁹ Truth is not to be understood as the hidden core of a work of art that needs to be unearthed with interpretation; rather, the role of philosophy is "not to solve the riddle of art's truth-content but to extrapolate what is insoluble,"⁹⁰ to

⁸⁶ For this point and the following discussion of art's language character, my analysis is indebted to Simon Jarvis' clear exposition on the subject in his work, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 90-120.

⁸⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Experience*, 124.

⁸⁸ Adorno, 124.

⁸⁹ Jarvis, 104.

⁹⁰ Jarvis, 104.

express the possibility of the possible. Art provides no assurance of actuality, makes no promise that the possibility it conveys will come to creative fruition; rather, it only “points toward utopia.”⁹¹

Thus far, the analysis of Adorno’s aesthetic theory offered here has only indirectly served our current purpose of unveiling the nature of the activity of the individual engendered by the work of art, by the beautiful, and, by analogy, the image of contradiction. We can now see how the relationship between philosophy and art is, for Adorno, quite complex. Artworks, we are told, are a form of critique; therefore, like philosophy, exercise “determinate criticisms of what is and what has been ... by exhibiting the way in which they (works of philosophy and/or art) hold open the possibility of the new.”⁹² This holding open is known in and through the subject’s affective experience. It is to it that we will now turn our attention. A work of art presents itself as the image of its representative contents, as the explosion of color inseparable from the sun setting over the sea, as a literal aesthetic event, while, simultaneously, presenting itself as an interrogation of the very same image’s production. Thus, the non-discursive knowledge of indeterminacy arrives in the form of the questioning of itself, a showing of itself as the effects of its own operations. The communication of the non-discursive truth of possibility might be thought similar to an evocation of both wonder and desire. An image evidencing transcendence (which is only as possibility) presents itself as disruption of the governing stability, the transformative and habituated operations, that attend experience as structured by the faculties of

⁹¹ Jarvis, 105.

⁹² Jarvis, 105.

knowledge. Adorno describes this experience as that of an aesthetic convulsion. He writes:

The feelings provoked by artworks are real and to this extent extra-aesthetic ... the aesthetic shudder once again cancels the distance held by the subject. Although artworks offer themselves to observation, they at the same time disorient the observer ... to him is revealed the truth of the work as if it must also be his own. The instant of this transition is art's highest.⁹³

The result of the aesthetic experience of a great work of art is the provocation of a certain self-awareness in the viewer of the artwork. Before the artwork, I come to recognize that the truth it communicates is that of my own freedom; its indeterminacy before which I convulse with the ineffable sense of pleasure that does not distinguish itself from the apprehension of possibility that is anxiety, this becomes my own-most possibility. The truth of my subjectivity is revealed in this affective moment; or, rather, to put it more accurately, the un-truth of subjective comprehension via the conceptual operations of understanding is revealed through the sensual encounter with a something of which we know not what it is. Even if we hesitate to designate it as a direct encounter with the transcendent, to name it, that is, as mystical experience of the divine, nonetheless it can be said to offer experiential, affective evidence of its possibility. It is the experience of the subject encountering its exteriority, not as a prohibitive block against the absolute that we might or must assume in Kantian fashion to exist on the other side, but as a sign, the sign of the perpetual opening up toward the absolute tantamount to the call of the beyond and, thereby, the promise of hope. As Adorno states: "the subject, convulsed by art, has real experiences ... those in which the subject's petrification in his own subjectivity dissolves and the narrowness of his self-positing is revealed." If there is happiness to

⁹³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 269.

be found here, it is “a happiness that is counterposed to the subject;” the instrument of revelation is “tears.”⁹⁴

As I stand before a beautiful work of art, as I stand before the beloved, as I stand before the God-man, there is motion generated within me, I am moved, in the case of revelation, to tears. I shudder. While this motion is undergone as having its source in that which, as possibility, is possibly transcendent to myself, that is, I cannot successfully now turn away and shut myself up within the confines of the demonic attempt to reserve the self that this image threatens. To the contrary, I come to recognize myself in my failure to categorize the image that is inseparable from the image’s failure to convey in image the very transcendence of image it suggests. This is to say that I come to recognize my freedom in being bound to the interrogative image of the failure of transcendence to present itself (a failure that, by means of the paradox, succeeds). The sign of contradiction commands the response of my heart:

There is a something that makes it impossible not to look – and look, as one is looking one sees as in a mirror, one comes to see oneself, or he who is the sign of contradiction looks straight into one’s heart while one is staring into the contradiction ... it is a riddle, but as he is guessing the riddle, what dwells within him is disclosed by the way he guesses. The contradiction confronts with a choice, and as he is choosing, together with what he chooses, he himself is disclosed.⁹⁵

In such disclosure, is the demonic conquered with the force of love? Do we recognize ourselves as we disclose that which remains invisible despite its disclosure? Are we each, somehow, the unnamed beloved disciples of Christ?

⁹⁴ Adorno, 268.

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 127.

Excursus C: The Artist's Model: Aesthetic Ideas in Kant's Critique of Judgment

I could wish that I were a painter, for this moment in a girl's life, precisely because it is only a moment, actually can only be painted; since it presupposes no development, it cannot be described.⁹⁶

Kierkegaard's words refer to those of Johannes', the pseudonymous seducer purportedly responsible for penning the "Seducer's Diary" section of *Either/Or*. The moment, precisely as only a moment, the centerpiece of their joint concern, is that of the suddenness of a specifically feminine form of beauty's birth into the world. In distinction from a path of development traceable as rational, this model of beauty is that of a rupture, to some extent, of rational coherency. Eulogizing this ideal, Johannes writes, "it is not only Minerva who springs full grown out of Jupiter's forehead, it is not only Venus who rises up out of the sea in her full beauty – every young girl is like this..."⁹⁷

Analogous to the ineffable character of the immediacy of the musical erotic that is, nonetheless, expressed with the music, beauty's rupture into experience resists the discursive operations of language, yet is, to some extent, conveyed through the imagery of the visual artist. Whether it is the powerful sublimity of the image of Botticelli's Venus emerging from the sea on her conch shell or the distant, unsettling gaze of Balthus' image of Thérèse stretched over her chair, the painter's appears the privileged art in relation to that certain ineffability (certainty of uncertainty) attendant to feminine beauty's coming into the world as the world's poetic transformation. Thus, the artist's imagery of beauty serves as an exemplary model of that communication of an

⁹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Pap.* III B 56:3 *n.d.*, 1841-42; Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 563.

⁹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 332.

experiential knowledge of possibility via aesthetic experience that Kierkegaard's writings seek to convey. Ultimately this experiential/aesthetic knowledge can be understood as an awareness of the inseparability of transcendent meaning's possibility from its essential in-decidability.

Inexplicable, the ideal of beauty that sets the self in motion is that of the poetic transfiguration of the world, that of ideality's insertion into conscious experience such that, in and of the moment, experience means more than that which the categorization of our knowing could possibly bestow upon it. An image evidencing the possibility of the transcendent as the question of itself, in other words, presents itself as disruption of the stability, the habituated operations of governance that attend experience as structured by the faculties of knowledge. Although not painted images, the thought-images produced by Kierkegaard's texts, those "scribbled picture-puzzles ... of something that cannot be said in words,"⁹⁸ operate, to a significant degree, in a manner structurally identical to the communicative force of the imagery of painted beauty. One significant image that arises out of the pages of *Either/Or* to engage with the aesthetic and intellectual faculties of the reader is that of the young girl and the transformative effect of her beauty. Within the account of artistic genius in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant develops the concept of the aesthetic idea as that which the genius produces in the creation of *schönes Kunst* and as that which "prompts much thought," within the viewer of the artwork, "but to which no thought whatsoever, i.e., no *concept* [*Begriff*], can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it."⁹⁹ If I am correct to allow that the

⁹⁸ Adorno, *Notes on Literature*, Vol. 2, 323.

⁹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 182.

imagery of Kierkegaard's work functions, as it were, in a manner analogous to the image of idealized beauty in painting, then Kant's analysis of aesthetic ideas might serve as significant illumination of the role of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's attempted project of indirect-communication. What follows here is an analysis of Kant's text that works toward the goal of seeking an explication of the function of imagery in Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*.

The discussion between §44 and §50 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* contains his analysis of fine (*schönes*) art, as distinguished from the mechanical (*mechanische*) variety, his explication of the genius as "the innate mental predisposition [*angeborene Gemütsanlage*] (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art,"¹⁰⁰ an analysis well known as a cornerstone of modern romanticism, and his thoughts on the complicated, at times contentious, relation between beauty, artistic genius and taste [*Geschmack*]. These are the explicit topics of investigation; yet, they contribute to the more encompassing, and here less explicit, project of uncovering the transcendental conditions for the communicability of aesthetic judgments. The type of aesthetic judgment being considered is that of the beautiful as it manifests itself in works of fine art. Fine art is deserving of its title to the extent that it fulfills the following conditions: 1) It is *aesthetic*, meaning it "intends directly [to arouse] the feeling of pleasure [*hat sie aber das Gefühl der Lust zur unmittelbaren Absicht*]."¹⁰¹ 2) in distinction from the pleasure accompanying "presentations that are mere *sensations* [*Vorstellungen als bloße Empfindungen*]," which are merely "agreeable [*Angenehme*]," fine art is generative of

¹⁰⁰ Kant, 174. *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1990), 160. The German page numbers will follow those of the English translation in the citations to follow.

¹⁰¹ Kant, 172, 158.

pleasure “accompany[ing] presentations that are *ways of cognizing [Erkenntnisarten]*.”¹⁰²

This pleasurable form of cognition, however, is not conceptual. It is not akin to the discursive knowing involved in the reflective application of the categories to the intuitions of sensibility as outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As Kant states it: while “every art presupposes rules ... the concept of fine art [*der Begriff der schönen Kunst*] does not permit a judgment about the beauty of its product to be derived from any rule whatsoever that has a *concept* as its determining basis [*einen Begriff zum Bestimmungsgrund habe*], i.e., the judgment must not be based on a concept of the way in which the product is possible.”¹⁰³ Therefore, this particular type of aesthetic judgment is irreducible to the sensual and to the conceptual alike. Even if we acknowledge that the artwork, as an object, must take form according to a rule it presupposes, it is not by the means of an understanding or perception of this rule that the artwork is experienced, that is, judged to be beautiful. That “fine art is possible only as the product of genius”¹⁰⁴ amounts to a confession of the ineffability of the source of the beautiful as it appears in art in the supersensible substrate of experience. Does the beautiful, as experienced, provide epistemic evidence, however indirect, of the supersensible?

The knowledge involved in the pleasurable experience of fine art is other than that involved in the cognitive experience of an ordinary object. Take, for example, my experience of the desk upon which I am now at work. From the standpoint of Kant’s model of cognition, my experience, in essence, is constructed as a judgment: the passive, sensual apprehension of this thing before me occupying space and occurring within time

¹⁰² Kant, 172, 158.

¹⁰³ Kant 175, 160.

¹⁰⁴ Kant 175, 160.

results in a particular, and thus unformed, intuition of the object upon which the active, categorizing, and thus abstract and general, operations of the understanding are then applied. The result of this process is the representation of this particular set of sensations through the form they receive in being categorized within the general concept of a desk. For the most part, my judgment that before me is a desk and not a potato is the result of the *a priori* structuring of my experience via the conceptual operations of the mind.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, given its dependence upon conceptual comprehension, I am confident that I will be able to readily communicate my cognitive experience of the desk, to represent it to another through the expressive capacities of the medium of language. Note: I do not experience this desk as beautiful. Now, let us take as a counter example my hypothetical experience of another type of object altogether, the fine work of art, which, I do indeed experience as compellingly beautiful. Let's say, I happen to be standing before Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. Insofar as the sketch of my experience of the desk serves as a fair model of Kant's explanation of cognition, I must describe my experience of Venus' image erupting from the sea as that of this form of cognition's disruption, a rupture, as it were, in the continuity of experience as populated with objects as structured by cognitive judgment. A claim is made on my experience by the painting such that I experience it as other than the object it is – its effect overflows the comprehensive grasp of the categories of understanding. The

¹⁰⁵ For the sake of simplicity and for the moment I am leaving out a discussion of the role of the imagination in the process of cognition. The imagination, in the first *Critique* is responsible for the welding, as it were, of the pure intuitions of sensation to the formative activity of the categories of the mind. The operation of the imagination consists in the schematization of the categories such that their pure abstract generality becomes applicable to the concrete singularity of sensual intuitions. Heidegger's influential reading of Kant places great emphasis on the schematizing activity of the imagination; so does Adorno's interpretation, although he is more cautious than Heidegger in his evaluation of the significance of the schematism. For an insightful comparison of the two respective thinkers views on Kant, see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 199-207.

pleasure I undergo in being taken by its beauty cannot be traced back to a readily communicable concept. Thus, insofar as this pleasure's form of judgment involves "ways of cognizing,"¹⁰⁶ insofar as it is based on something more than the type of straightforward sensual pleasure I take in, say, the experience of sipping a hot cup of tea on a cold morning, all I can say in regard to the rule by which this beauty is determined is that it remains "deeply hidden [*tief verborgen*]."¹⁰⁷ The way I know the beautiful is not *via* the subsuming of the particular under a general category; in this sense, the experience of beauty must be understood to be not the equivalent of its identification. Rather, what I encounter face to face with the beautiful image of Venus, with the image of the power of the image itself, is the disruptive effect of the transfiguration of experience by ideality. The aesthetic judgment of beauty, the basis of which is a subjective affectivity independent from the requirements of objective verifiability, is the result of an aesthetic knowledge of what Kant calls aesthetic ideas. The generation and communication of ideality through the production of aesthetic ideas is the task of the genius.

An inquiry that sets out to identify the criteria with which a work of art is regarded as beautiful or not misses its mark. In Kant's words, "if we search for a principle of taste that states the universal criterion of the beautiful by means of determinate concepts ... we search for something that is impossible and intrinsically contradictory."¹⁰⁸ Yet, according to Kant, essential to the judgment of taste and in contrast to the judgment of the agreeable, both of which are rightly understood to be

¹⁰⁶ Kant, 172, 157.

¹⁰⁷ Kant, 79, 72.

¹⁰⁸ Kant, 79, 72.

aesthetic judgments, is that a judgment of the beautiful possess “universal validity [*Allgemeingültiges*].”¹⁰⁹ This is to say that implicit in the evaluative dimension of my pleasure before Botticelli’s masterpiece is the expectation, the requirement even, that the predication of beauty I immediately attribute to the painting extend “over the entire sphere of *judging persons* [*für jedermann*].”¹¹⁰ I do not reflectively believe that the painting is beautiful, but experience it as beautiful in its concrete and immediate mode of presentation. In other words, my conviction has the strength of knowledge, not opinion. I know that it is beautiful, and this peculiar form of knowledge also knows that you too will find it beautiful, and necessarily so. Within the affective state of the individuated subject, Kant finds a judgment of universality. Yet, if I were asked to explain why I find the painting so compellingly beautiful, I would be at loss for words. Please do not ask me to provide reasons why I know Botticelli’s Venus to be beautiful. We could discuss the technical composition and mastery of the painting, the symbols used by the painter and their potential meanings, the historical context out of which the masterwork was produced; all such talk would be of that which can be known about the artwork with the aid of conceptual abstraction. My making you aware of these communicable features of the painting, however, may convince you that it is to be considered a masterpiece, but will not allow you to grasp, convince you to experience, the painting’s beauty. That it be beautiful does not accord with conceptual reason but rather, and thus, the source of its beauty does not give itself over to the interrogative *why*. All I can say is that you must see it and then I am absolutely certain that you will understand. At issue here is the impossibility of communicating an a-conceptual, particular experience of pleasure that is,

¹⁰⁹ Kant, 58, 52.

¹¹⁰ Kant, 59, 53.

importantly, not a-cognitive, without reference to the determinate pieces of communication known as words. I cannot convince you of Venus' beauty with my words. Then again, if you were standing before this painting with me, I would have no need. We would, without conscious reflection or discussion, recognize our individuated experiences to be self-evidently communal. Kant's thought is a struggle to express this essentially inexpressible insight: the communication of the experience of beauty presupposes as the very condition of its impossibility (i.e., that it cannot be accounted for directly, conceptually), its "universal communicability."¹¹¹

Kant's transcendental critique seeks to uncover the conditions for the possibility of experience. In relation to our current concerns, it is beneficial to keep this in mind. While language refuses the request for reasons to justify the experience of the ideality of the beautiful, while it may be the case that the criteria that make aesthetic judgment more than an assent to sensual pleasure remain interminably hidden from view, from the perspective of the critical philosopher, all of this need not be so bothersome. Kant is interested less in answering the question of why we deem a particular image beautiful and more determined to uncover the conditions that together would speak to the issue of how such experience is possible in the first place. While not unrelated by any means, the how and the why require distinct strategies of pursuit. If I cannot tell you why I find this particular painting beautiful, or for that matter, this particular scenic vista, or this particular person, I can, nonetheless, endeavor to speak to the question of how it is that I experience it. In doing so, I might begin to unearth what must be the case for my

¹¹¹ Kant 79, 53.

experience to be structured in the fashion that it is.¹¹² A judgment of taste, Kant tells us, one that decides “whether something is beautiful or not,” does not:

use understanding [*Verstand*] to refer the presentation [*Vorstellung*] to the object so as to give rise to cognition [*Erkenntnis*]; rather, we use imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] (perhaps in connection with understanding [*Verstand*]) to refer the presentation [*Vorstellung*] to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure ... this reference designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself, how he is affected by the presentation [*wie es durch die Vorstellung affiziert wird, sich selbst fühlt*].¹¹³

The representation of the beautiful is experience’s judgment of its affective state of well being, of just “liking” the representational operations through which the beautiful object is presented. Kant provides a sense of what he means by this sensation of well being [*Empfindung des Wohlgefallens*]¹¹⁴ by describing it as the subject’s “feeling of life [*Lebensgefühl*].”¹¹⁵ Beauty is known, then, as an experiential intensification of the qualitative dimension of life itself. Kant attributes this power of intensification, of experience’s poetic transfiguration to “Spirit [*Geist*],” as that “animating principle of the mind [*belebende Prinzip im Gemüthe*]” for which aesthetic ideas form the “material [*Stoff*]” with which it “imparts to the mental powers a purposive momentum, i.e., imparts to them a play which is such that it sustains itself on its own and even strengthens the

¹¹² I am intentionally obscuring any difference between the experience of natural beauty and the experience of the beauty in fine art. For Kant there indeed is a difference. The experience of the beautiful in art is the more troublesome for Kant as it involves attributing an almost divine like quality to the creative genius who produces the artwork and thereby communicates through the aesthetic ideas he constructs incommunicable ideality. Nature appears as art, that is, as an appearance, while art appears as nature, that is, as uncontrived, natural as it were, in the beautiful experience. If pursued, this reciprocity might easily become a point of substantial indeterminacy.

¹¹³ Kant, 44, 39-40.

¹¹⁴ Kant, 40. My translation.

¹¹⁵ Kant, 44, 40.

powers of such play [*sich von selbst erhahlt und selbst die Krafte dazu starkt*].”¹¹⁶ In short, while I could never find reason enough to justify my judgment of the beautiful in relation to objective concepts, hence, I am at a loss to fully answer the question of the why, how I experience the beautiful is as a judgment that outstrips conceptual bounds, engenders a heightened sense of aliveness, my own sense of spiritedness, and gives rise to and sustains an affective quickening of the intensity of life itself.

Experience of the beautiful in fine art, understood as the non-conceptual judgment based upon the subjective, affective state of the subject, contains within itself, as essential to itself, the assumption of its universal communicability. Thus, in distinction from a judgment of mere sensual pleasure, for example, as the taste I might have for strong British tea, the pleasure I take in the intensification of my affective state before the beautiful work of art makes a claim on the experience of any other would-be viewer of the artwork that he too be moved in spirit, in-spired by the animating force of life. Both the possible favor and disfavor with which you may experience black tea, as a matter of taste, so to say, would be entirely comprehensible to me, as would any process of your acquiring, over time, a taste for tea. I cannot say the same for the pleasure I take before one of Botticelli’s masterpieces. Incomprehensibility is part of its essential structure. What is incomprehensible is the way the pleasure I take before a masterpiece has as its necessary condition of possibility the requirement of your pleasure, your assent to my judgment of its beauty, that our individuated sensibilities be of a community the organizing principle of which remains *incommunicado*, despite the communicability it organizes as being, in effect, universal. All of this is to say that Kant’s judgment of taste

¹¹⁶ Kant, 181-182, 167.

has as its subjective condition, “the universality of the mental state, in the given presentation [*Vorstellung*] ... and the pleasure in the object must be its consequence.”¹¹⁷ Unlike judgments the basis of which are pleasure in sense only, there is a cognitive, reflective dimension to the experience of beauty. Yet, this aesthetic cognition does not correspond with a concept requiring the understanding’s assent. That which provokes the beautiful judgment thus becomes the aesthetic communication of something more than aesthetic experience. Appearances, the phenomenal, become enlivened, animated by the spirit in such a way that the habituated grasp of comprehension, the very means with which everyday existence is navigated, is knocked loose and the imagery of the world itself is unsettled into a form of sustained play. This play is, according to Kant, the interplay of the faculties of cognition. “It is the feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers [*auf diesem Gefühle der Freiheit im Spiele unserer Erkenntnisvermögen*], a play that yet must also be purposive, which underlies that pleasure which alone is universally communicable although not based on concepts.”¹¹⁸

If the representation provoking the judgment of beauty were “a concept [*Begriff*],” which served to “unite understanding [*Verstand*] and imagination [*Einbildungskraft*], so as to give rise to cognition of the object,” then this relation would be “intellectual” and thus easily communicated *via* the conceptual, that is, intellectual, operations of language.¹¹⁹ Paramount here is the contrasting a-conceptual structure of the representation of beauty that throws the faculties into a suspended state of play, the lack

¹¹⁷ Kant, 61, 54.

¹¹⁸ Kant, 173-174, 159.

¹¹⁹ Kant, 63, 57.

of a conceptual criterion by which the beautiful is judged, and the attendant problem of how an a-conceptual form of communication might be possible. Kant writes:

A judgment of taste determines the object, independently of concepts, with regard to liking and the predicate of beauty. Hence that unity in the relation in the subject can reveal itself only through sensation [*durch Empfindung kenntlich machen*]. This sensation, whose universal communicability a judgment of taste postulates, is the quickening of the two powers (imagination and understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but, as a result of the prompting of the given presentation, nonetheless accordant: the activity required for cognition in general.¹²⁰

Our cognition of the principle by which the beautiful is determined remains a knowing of the unknown as such. Yet, it is more than apophatic in character, this aesthetic knowing of the principle is “sensed in the effect it has on the mind.” And not being based on a concept, “the only way we can become conscious of it,” is through “the facilitated play of the two mental powers (imagination and understanding) quickened by their reciprocal harmony.”¹²¹ The affectation of pleasure in the state of well being induced within the subject is this setting into harmonic, expressive motion the faculties of cognition. The communication of this experience, a-conceptual and particularized as it is, and thus resistance to direct linguistic expression, is what is at stake in the production and reception of *schönes Kunst*. What we have here is the communication of an experience that, from the standpoint of the individual subject, comes as close to a pre-reflective grasp of the truth of ideality as can imaginatively be posited within the reflective or presentational mode of consciousness. This present analysis is concerned with the issue of the aesthetic communication of this experience, the how, that is, which speaks to the genius’ ability to capture, present, and transfer an experiential knowledge of ideality

¹²⁰ Kant, 63, 57.

¹²¹ Kant 63, 57.

through his or her creations. Aesthetic ideas are the means of such a communicative transference. While keeping in mind the proscription that we speak to the how rather than the why of the experience of beauty, let us now turn toward an inquiry into the nature of these specifically aesthetic ideas.

Kant's discussion of the genius as the producer of beautiful art culminates with the extended discussion of aesthetic ideas undertaken in §49, "On the Powers of the Mind Which Constitute Genius."¹²² He proposes the notion of *Geist* as a qualitative predication present in the work of artistic genius and as that by which aesthetic judgment of beauty is made. Fine art distinguishes itself by the presence of spirit in its productions. Spirit is the substance of that communication that is effectuated within the affective experience of the judgment of the beautiful – the a-conceptual awareness of universal community. Not every attempted piece of fine art, nor every artwork claiming to be such an attempt, manifests the presence of spirit. Moreover, we cannot positively identify spirit's presence in an artwork, since, it cannot be the result of the work's adherence to identifiable, that is, conceptual, criteria and thus does not lend itself to linguistic description. As he states it, the presence of spirit is not the consequence of identifiable mastery of technique or form: "a poem may be quite nice and elegant and yet have not spirit. A story may be precise and orderly and yet have no spirit," in the same way that "many conversations are entertaining," even if uninspired.¹²³ We recognize spirit

¹²² Kant, 181-188, 167-174.

¹²³ Kant, 181, 167. Kant continues this series of examples with one of his more curious: "Even about some woman we will say that she is pretty, communicative, and polite, but that she has not spirit. Well, what do we mean here by spirit." Presumably, these attributes would not add up to the beauty of a truly beautiful woman. That requires the presence of spirit. Kant's uncharacteristic use of a woman's beauty as an example is suggestive that the experience of the beauty of fine art and of a beautiful person are analogical, at least. His other evocation of feminine beauty is contained in the section just prior to the one under discussion at present. There, she serves as the stated example that will connect aesthetic judgments of the

affectively, know it experientially, and recognize the hollowing effect of its absence in the hack productions of the genius' impersonator. While spirit itself cannot be identified conceptually, we can at least attempt to identify the means of its transmission from, to follow Kant, nature through the genius into the artwork and from the artwork to the event of its aesthetic appreciation by the subject; the materiality of the soul's animation by spirit are aesthetic ideas. Even if the ideal they convey must remain a non-identical, aesthetic ideas, however indirectly, can be identified. Kant identifies the animating principle of *Geist* in the following passage:

this principle is nothing but the ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas* [*dieses Prinzip sei nichts anderes als das Vermögen der Darstellung ästhetischer Ideen*]; and by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination [*Vorstellung der Einbildungskraft*] which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no *concept* [*Begriff*], can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.¹²⁴

Art communicates through the production of these ideas the meaning of which, insofar as we might identify the apparent signs or appearance through which spirit is expressed, for example, Venus' image as expressive of the ideality of feminine beauty, overflow their

beautiful to teleological (foundational) judgment of the purposive structure of the universe, where "we judge nature no longer as it appears as art, but insofar as it actually *is* art (though superhuman art), and [so we make a] teleological judgment that serves the aesthetic one as a foundation and condition that it must take into account." When we say that is a beautiful woman, "we think nothing other than that nature offers us in the women's figure a beautiful presentation of the purposes in the female" But if we are to think this way, "through a logically conditioned aesthetic judgment, we have to look beyond the mere form and toward a concept," 180-181. At the same time, Kant is quick to point out that fine art has the capacity to present the ugly beautifully. "The Furies, diseases, devastations of war ... can be described or presented in a painting, very beautifully." There is a limit point, however, to this transfigurative power over the ugly and difficult: disgust. What Kant says to this effect is worth noting: "in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful," 180. It seems the experience of disgust represents a point of limitation against which our comprehension of experience, its ultimate incomprehensibility, as it were, comes into focus. This point of limitation is one wherein art and life, artistic representation and cognitive sensation become indistinguishable. Here, reality is literally a product of the imagination.

¹²⁴ Kant, 182, 167-168.

appearances. Enriched with the poetic force of ideality, appearances of the beautiful are of appearance enlivened, enshrined even, with the spiritual force of creation. The significance of the appearance of the beautiful is that of appearance's transformation, the beautiful image evidence of the supersensible as the effect, as it were, of its animating force. Aesthetic ideas communicate through setting into motion the cognitive faculties of the subject, prompting the activity of thought, rational reflection, along with that of the expansive function of the imagination, such that "reason think[s] more, when prompted by a [certain presentation], than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the presentation (though the thought does pertain to the concept of the object [presented])."¹²⁵

The function of aesthetic ideas, thus, bears a striking resemblance to that of the thought-images (*Denkbilder*) Adorno identifies to be at work in the miniaturized style of critical analysis belonging to Walter Benjamin.¹²⁶ Recall that the use of such imagery as a means of the stimulation of the appropriative, interpretative and thus intellectual activity of the reader was earlier shown to be a hallmark of Kierkegaard's strategic use of the aesthetic. Kierkegaard's attempt to think and convey a singularity resistant to all conceptuality could be thought as an extension of Kant's attempt to present that unrepresentable criteria of beauty and genius understood now as the presence of the animative force of *Geist*. It is my contention, moreover, that out of the imagery with which Kierkegaard weaves the tapestry of his thought emerges, as images embodying the force of ideality driving his work, the particular thought-images that convey the erotic immediacy of the sensual as such; for example, in *Either/Or* we encounter the image of

¹²⁵ Kant, 183, 171.

¹²⁶ Cf. Chapter Two, section ii of this work. There, the thought-image is shown to be an adequate notion for representing the particular function of imagery in Kierkegaard's work.

the young-girl whose idealized form of ineffable beauty mirrors that of her seducer, the image, strictly speaking an image that never appears, that of *Don Giovanni* as the musical, the spiritual force of the erotic itself. Adorno says of the *Denkbilder*: “they do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving ... to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire.”¹²⁷ While the conflagration of the familiar may be a bit too dramatic a description for the rather somber Kant, the affective judgment of the beautiful based on the conveyance of spirit through the aesthetic ideas of the artist could be seen to have a similar, disruptive effect. The transformative experience of communion with the transcendent, of the validity of an impossible form of communication, intensifies the ground of experience, of lived-reality, expands its possibilities toward the direction of the ungraspable ideal, into the infinite. The determination of the beautiful is of and by the indeterminate as such – the force of the indeterminate is the determinate, yet ever opening toward the possible, creative expression of *Geist*. Turning back sharply into Kant’s text, we read that it is through the exercise of the imagination that we come to “feel our freedom from the law of association [*wir unsere Freiheit vom Gesetze der Assoziation*].”¹²⁸ For although, empirically the use of the imagination is tied to this law and that nature thus “lends us material ... under that law,” this material can be “processed,” imaginatively arranged such that it is expressive

¹²⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 323.

¹²⁸ Kant 182, 168.

of “something that surpasses nature.”¹²⁹ The communication of the singularity of aesthetic experience, of, in Kierkegaard’s terms, the truth of specifically affective and thus subjective experience, has as the condition for the possibility of its transference more than just the universal expression contained within any particular and singular aesthetic judgment. The communication effectuated in the creation and reception of aesthetic ideas is contingent upon the stimulation of the productive imagination, both in the artist and the viewer of the art.

The imaginative arrangement of the materiality of experience, of the phenomena, of the representational images that compose it, into configurative structures that convey, in the form of an image, more than what can be expressed of the image conceptually, is the exercise of what Adorno terms the *Exacte Phantasie*, the exact imagination, of the dialectical writing of the philosopher. It is also that activity that the writing seeks to generate in its would-be reader such that the act of reading become aware of itself as, precisely, an exercise of dialectical thought. Shierry Weber NicholSEN’s work brings our attention to the centrality of this activity, equally intellectual and aesthetic in character, throughout Adorno’s entire body of work. She observes:

Adorno’s term “exact imagination” [*Exakte Phantasie*] marks this conjunction of knowledge, experience, and aesthetic form. The term points provocatively and explicitly to the relationship between exactness – reflecting a truth claim – and the imagination as the agency of a subjective and aconceptual experience.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Kant, 182, 168.

¹³⁰ Shierry Weber NicholSEN, *Exact Imagination, Late Work on Adorno’s Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 4. She notes that her choice to translate *Exact Phantasie* as exact imagination rather than exact or precise fantasy is based on her conviction that Adorno intended to evoke Kant and the aesthetic more than Freud with his use of *Phantasie*, 229.

Nicholsen puts forward the provocative claim that the conjunction referred to here is “premised on the possibility of a valid, that is, “adequate” or “authentic,” subjective experience,” a possibility that she maintains Adorno’s thought actively strives to keep open. Against and within the “illusion of a constitutive subjectivity,” and the “withering of the capacity for individual experience in an administrated society that performs experience,” the aesthetic dimension of Adorno’s thinking holds out for the truth of subjectivity, of the redemption of the particular, “a genuine subjective experience [as] the condition for nondiscursive knowledge of the object.”¹³¹ The configurational activity of the exact imagination “is an activity of the subject as well as a feature of form.”¹³² Adorno’s notion of exact imagination represents an attempt to name the function of the Kantian subject’s “organ of the inner sense,” otherwise known as the soul, the “object” of this same inner sense.¹³³ Perhaps this organ is analogous to that receptivity toward the ineffable we earlier referred to as the function of the “speculative ear.” Remarking on Adorno’s comments on Bach’s music to the effect that it is full of “beautiful passages” that, in being heard as beautiful, disrupt the categorization of aesthetic experience into the merely subjective and the objectively verifiable. When “subjective aesthetic experience ... is articulated in language, it is expressed in figurative language, in imagery.”¹³⁴

The exact imagination of the reader of Kierkegaard’s aesthetic productions mediates between the sensual and the intellectual. The images painted with his words function as aesthetic ideas, embody and express spirit. Our relation to them is

¹³¹ Nicholsen, 4.

¹³² Nicholsen, 4.

¹³³ Kant, 82. Pluhar suggests we compare Kant’s *Anthropology* and *Critique of Pure Reason*, in relation to the connection between the inner sense and the soul.

¹³⁴ Nicholsen, 26.

simultaneously cognitive and sensual as they inspire the activity of the productive imagination as it works to outstrip appearances with the possibility of infinity they convey. These images of meaning more ideal, possibly real, than the grasp of cognition, set the imagination into play with the conceptual operations of the understanding. The products of this creative play suspend the understanding's function of subsumption through sustaining the phenomenal saturation of experience with ideality; they are images of the resistance the imagination holds out against being reduced in its importance to either the intuitive appearances or the reflective abstractions it serves to connect in the act of cognition. These images of thought, *Denkbilder* involve the reader, "in a serious play and a vexing dance of meaning, not simply its denotative meaning but also its participation in the larger process of hermeneutic decoding that it at the same time resists."¹³⁵ As Johannes reminds us in his diary of seduction, it is the imagination that is the real means of communication between Cordelia and himself; by extension we might add, between Kierkegaard and his reader, the artistic genius and the beholder of fine art. Aesthetic ideas are to be found within the domain of the imaginary; the aesthetic is the principle of possibility facilitating that this domain's construction be an activity *ad infinitum*. The image produced by Kierkegaard's texts to which I relate dialectically, imaginatively, interpretatively, those personas and poetized exemplars of ideals through which my role as reader becomes that of their principle director, the provider of their arrangement. Kant's analysis of the aesthetic idea seems to capture the spirit of this imagery's function quite well:

¹³⁵ Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 13.

an aesthetic idea is a presentation [*Vorstellung*] of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it.¹³⁶

In other words, the concept with which the idea is connected is the indeterminate limit point of conceptual, that is, linguistic expression. Thus, Kant continues:

it is a presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the feeling which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters, with spirit [*Geist*].¹³⁷

Let us not forget that communication via the aesthetic is the current subject matter of investigation. To state it more emphatically, the genius, the producer of the aesthetic ideas that convey the presence of spirit, is the conduit of communication between the phenomenal and what we must designate to remain the noumenal. Kant's suggestion is that this communication of the transcendent within the immanent, as it were, a communication the structure of which remains indeterminate, is itself the condition for the possibility for language to successfully communicate its content meaningfully at all. Let us then return our attention to §49 of Kant's text.

The apprehension of aesthetic ideas is in the form of the affective awareness of the subject's motion within himself, the movement into play of his cognitive faculties, his being moved, as it were, by the beautiful such that these ideas are followed with the imagination as "striv[ing] toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience."¹³⁸ The motion of the spirit, the inspiration taken in and through the

¹³⁶ Kant, 185, 172.

¹³⁷ Kant, 185, 171.

¹³⁸ Kant 182, 169.

experience of beauty in the work of art, is the work of the aesthetic idea. Yet, the aesthetic idea, that which the artistic genius produces, is itself a product of the genius' apprehension of the idea in nature. Artistic production of the beautiful requires a model. The artist needs his model as his muse, his own experiential contact with the actuality of ideality in the world, the actuality, that is, of possibility. If the classification of genius has validity I would say Kierkegaard's inclusion is a safe wager. The genius, Kant tells us, consists in a certain relation to experience, that allows:

[him] to discover ideas ... and second to hit upon a way of *expressing* these ideas that enables [him] to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that those ideas produce. The second talent is properly the one we call spirit.

Thus, the discovery of ideality in the world or in the work of art is not the exclusive territory of genius, but the receptivity every subject displays to these ideas by means of their participation within the supersensible realm of universal sensibility. Yet it is the only the genius' capacity to "express what is ineffable," the musical accompaniment, to any certain presentation such as "to make it universally communicable – whether the expression consists in language or painting or plastic art."¹³⁹ The models of fine art are "the only means of transmitting these [aesthetic] ideas to posterity. Genius is as receptive a talent as it is a creative one: the genius is endowed by nature in such a way that he or she "needs nothing but an example [*Beispiel*]"¹⁴⁰ in order to put the creative motion of the exact imagination to work in the production of the models of their communication. Genius possesses a particular sensitivity, that is, to inspiration, to being moved by the presence of beauty in the world, to the in-articulate and indefinable, yet evident and

¹³⁹ Kant, 186, 172.

¹⁴⁰ Kant, 178, 161.

undeniable presence of spirit within the phenomenal. It is in this way that Kant can claim that genius, by itself, “only provides rich *material* [*Stoff*] for products of fine art,” while these products themselves must, to some extent, be dependent upon the academic training of the genius’ innate talent of receptivity to that which is in experience in the mode of not being there, at least if the genius’ production is “stand the test of the power of judgment.”¹⁴¹ Even if this is the case, the work of fine art that induces the communication of the beautiful and evidences spirit cannot be accounted for by means of the prescriptive rules provided by such training. The artist gives the rule to art via “natural endowment,” and such a rule “cannot be couched in a formula and serve as a precept.”¹⁴² Even the artist doesn’t understand the true mechanism of determination with which aesthetic ideas are produced; he cannot explain his creation, but he could strive to describe or represent his own affective experience of the beautiful.

The artistic genius’ labor is that of compelling form to take the particular, expressive arrangement of its content such that it becomes “the beautiful presentation [*Darstellung*] of an object, which is actually only the form of a concept’s exhibition, the form by which the concept is universally communicated.”¹⁴³ Adorno’s description of the artist’s desire for the beautiful, the unknown, the ideal speaks to this struggle for expression directly:

The pain experienced in a view of beauty is the yearning for that which is barred to the subject by the subjective block – that which, however, he knows to be truer than he is himself. Experience that

¹⁴¹ Kant, 164, 178.

¹⁴² Kant, 177.

¹⁴³ Kant, 180, 166.

would be free from that block, but not through coercion, is practiced in the submission of the subject to the law of aesthetic form.¹⁴⁴

The *ascesis* of the artist is, in some way, a discipline of submission to the unknowable law or principle of aesthetic judgment to which his sensibilities are, often painfully, sometimes ecstatically, attuned. The artist, “having practiced ... by a variety of examples from art or nature ... and, after many often laborious attempts to satisfy his taste, finds that form which is adequate to it.”¹⁴⁵ The artist’s model changes as his taste is refined in the direction of greater and greater approximation to the ideal – as a result, this expansive, forward momentum of thought into its limit point, is transferred as spirit in the production of aesthetic ideas of communication. If a “mannered” artwork results from an artist directing his aims to the expression of the ideal within the singular, at singularity as such, but “is not adequate to the idea;” failing in spirit appears “ostentatious (precious), stilted, and affected, with the sole aim of differing from the ordinary.”¹⁴⁶ We might deduce from the bungler’s inadequacy then the speculative structure of the aesthetic idea. The aesthetic ideas of the genuine work of fine art offer up for our experience the impossible to conceive reconciliation of particularity with the universality, the finite with the infinite, the subject, as it were, with the world.

Aesthetic communication results in experiential knowledge (that is not reflective but affective) of a realm of community (communal participation within the substrate of the supersensible). The transcendental conditions for the possibility of aesthetic judgment is an experience of that which is transcendent to the immanent operations of the

¹⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 396

¹⁴⁵ Kant, 180.

¹⁴⁶ Kant, 187-188, 174.

cognitive ordering of experience. Within the heart of Kant's transcendental critique of experience, at the root of the split between the phenomenal and noumenal, resides the trace evidence of transcendence. I am reminded here of Johannes' remark: "how enjoyable to be in motion within oneself."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 326.

iii: Aesthetic Salvation of the Demonic

If I go further [than the tragic hero] I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic; for silence is both of these. It is the demon's lure, and the more silent one keeps the more terrible the demon becomes; but silence is also divinity's communion with the individual (Søren Kierkegaard).¹⁴⁸

... insofar as the individual has entered the paradox ... he doesn't get out of the paradox, but must find either his blessedness or his damnation inside it (Søren Kierkegaard).¹⁴⁹

In *Fear and Trembling*, the third *Problema* has as its primary theme the question of the justification of Abraham's silence. We might ask if this question isn't a needless repetition of concerns already sufficiently dealt with in the two prior sections; that is, has not Abraham's inability to speak already been accounted for by his being suspended outside of the universal in his absolute and particular relation to the absolute? Given that language works through the expression of universal concepts at the expense of the particular, and given that Abraham as "the single individual is higher than the universal," it follows that the paradox within which he finds himself cannot be mediated, expressed in language, or for that matter, even in thought: "for as soon as he tries Abraham will have to admit that he is in a state of temptation."¹⁵⁰ But a question remains: how are we to distinguish between Abraham's inability to speak from within the tension of the paradox and a silence that is the result of a refusal to speak, since, after all, outwardly, silence is just silence? This section, then, attempts to answer this question by comparing

¹⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, 114.

¹⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, 102.

¹⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, 85.

the silence of Abraham with other aesthetically conceived forms of silence. However, the significance of the section stretches far beyond its ostensible concerns; it is here that certain “clues” are given that may help us to begin to outline an answer to the question of Abraham’s relation to us, although the complexity of the text may bar us from getting any further than the beginnings of such an understanding. Should we want to go further?

Although we are told that the first poetic *persona* discussed, the Delphic bridegroom, does not get us further than the tragic hero, Johannes uses the technique of imaginative variation to bring out a notable distinction between the silence of faith and a lesser, as it were, pseudo-silence that the tragic hero may face in the form of temptation. The bridegroom, having received a message from the augers that a great misfortune would be the result of his marriage, decides to call off his wedding. Since the auger’s proclamation is “intelligible to all” as “a decision of heaven’s,”¹⁵¹ however cryptic its form may be, he can speak, that is, he can make the reasons for his actions understandable to all. A refusal to do so in this case appears to be without justification: for “if he wants to remain silent it is because he wants, by virtue of being the single individual, to be higher than the universal, wants to delude himself”¹⁵² In other words, if the bridegroom desires to keep his motivations undisclosed, it could only be because he desires to assert his particularity/individuality over and against the ethical/universal, to affirm his actions as untranslatable into the realm of comprehensible and communicable ends, when in fact they are indeed translatable in this manner (this is quite similar to “sin” if and when the ethical is the universal). Important to take note of here is this element of *desiring* to be as the individual higher than the universal. This

¹⁵¹ Kierkegaard, 119.

¹⁵² Kierkegaard, 119.

wish is contrasted with the one accompanying the scenario of faith. Johannes entertains the possibility of the will of the gods not being announced to him publicly by an oracle but rather being communicated to him by taking up a private relationship with him. Here we are “with the paradox” and “he could not speak however much he might wish to;” if the communication between the divine and the bridegroom had itself been particular and private rather than universal and public, then the reason for his silence would not be a desire to “**place himself** as the single individual” higher than the universal in his very relation to it but instead a desire “**to be placed** as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute.”¹⁵³ Thus, Johannes is underscoring here a crucial distinction between wanting on the basis of one’s own capacities and inclinations to rank oneself above universal ethical requirements, to place oneself outside of the demands of the universal by refusing to speak, by refusing to participate by disclosing oneself through language, and the inability, not the refusal, to speak that accompanies the desire to receive one’s worth as single individual by a court of appeal both higher than the demands of the ethical and beyond the capacities of the single individual himself. Since the bridegroom must speak, we get no further than the tragic hero, but nonetheless with this theme of the self’s attitude or relation to its self and its own capacities our author has intimated here the sketch of the demonic that is to follow.

Johannes, again employing the aesthetic technique of imaginative variation, uses the Danish fable of the merman and Agnete to create one of the most interesting and perplexing conceptual issues of the book: the parallel structure of the activity of the self in paradoxical faith and the activity of the self held within the paradoxical snares of the

¹⁵³ Kierkegaard, 119.

demonic. Briefly rehearsed, the major change in the story is as follows: the merman, a demonic figure of seduction on par with Don Giovanni in being a force of nature, undergoes a disruption of his powers in the face of Agnete's innocence – that is, he falls for her. Realizing that the only way to have Agnete is as his “prize,” that is, as his possession, one he will destroy in the act of possessing (taking her to her death in the depths of the ocean), realizing, that is, that his love cannot be translated from ideality into reality, since “he is only a merman;” he takes her home explaining that he only wanted to show her the beauty of a calm sea. She, we are told, believes him, while he alone “rages” in despair. Johannes next says that he will “give the merman a human consciousness” (we might wonder if the previous episode hasn't somehow been an illustration for the giving of this consciousness – the demonic force embodied by the merman becoming conscious of itself as such a force and as guilty in its encounter with innocence). As human consciousness (reflective) and as never able to seduce again (as immediacy) “two powers claim control of him: repentance and repentance with Agnete.”¹⁵⁴ If the former possesses him, then he “remains concealed,” if the latter, “he is disclosed;” the former option will reveal itself to be at risk of possession in a demonic form and to be within the capacity of the individual, while the latter option will be claimed to only be a possibility only “on the strength of the absurd.”

If only the force of repentance (but what is the merman repenting ... his murderous desire?) grasps the merman, then we are told that certainly he will make Agnete unhappy, but he himself will become even more unhappy, his love being lost and his guilt (consciousness) being new. The demonic element in his repentance “will

¹⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, 122.

explain to him that this is precisely his punishment and the more it torments him the better.”¹⁵⁵ The demoniac enjoys his misery. Giving in to this possibility, he may think he can still save Agnete “in the way one can in a sense save someone by resort to evil,” that is, through acting out against her in such a way that “arouses her disgust” against him, through tormenting himself he aspires to free her. If he chooses this path, then, “by means of the demonic the merman would thus aspire to be the single individual who as the particular is higher than the universal. The demonic has that same property as the divine, that the single individual can enter into an absolute relationship to it.”¹⁵⁶ Significant to note here is the repetition of the theme of the desire of the particular individual by its own powers to place itself higher than the universal through concealment.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis describes the demonic as a resistance to disclosure that he names as the state of “Inclosing Reserve.” The demonic self could be said to be a motion of the self fleeing from itself by turning in and against itself, or perhaps we could say that the self flees its own task of freedom precisely through concentrating its *effort* to free itself from its bond to the universal, to the realm of the requirements of communication. In concentrating this desire it misrelates itself to itself, turns against itself and its freedom by attempting to be more than the self that it already is. The demonic self screams only “let me alone in my wretchedness.”¹⁵⁷ It enjoys its own nihilistic torment because its lived relation to itself, although false, is nonetheless absolute. It enjoys a delusional activity of attempting to

¹⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, 122.

¹⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, 123.

¹⁵⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 124-125.

absolutize its own particularity, to place itself by itself higher than the universal. The demoniac could and perhaps should speak but lives through the activity of refusing to do so and takes his own pain as “the proof of the justification of his silence;” yet his attempt at non-disclosure discloses itself as the failure of disclosure itself.

We are told that the merman could speak, that he could become the tragic hero, even a tragic hero “on a grand scale.” Then he would at least have the courage to crush Agnete “humanly speaking,” presumably meaning the courage to admit to her and the world the incommensurability of his love for Agnete with the possible and his guilt for having once desired to possess and destroy her. But such a disclosure would not serve as a catalyst for either the merman’s or Agnete’s salvation. Indeed, Johannes goes on from this point to quickly call into question the possibility of the merman’s speaking successfully disclosing himself at all, at least not by his own accord. If the merman avoids the demonic, then two possibilities paralleling the movements of infinite resignation and faith respectfully are opened. He can remain in hiding and thus undisclosed but resign himself with his active concern for Agnete by taking repose in the idea that the “divine will save Agnete” via infinite resignation or he can be saved by Agnete by becoming disclosed through marrying her. The latter option requires faith by strength of the absurd.

In order to marry Agnete, he “must still resort to the paradox,” but this paradox is different than that of the demonic and the necessity of “putting it on” stems from the individual’s consciousness of guilt: “for when through his own guilt the individual has come out of the universal, he can only return to it on the strength of having come, as the particular, into an absolute relation to the absolute ... in sin the individual is already in

terms of the demonic paradox higher than the universal.”¹⁵⁸ None of this we are told “helps to explain Abraham,” since he was after all “God’s chosen,” but does it somehow help to “explain” us or perhaps it would be better to say “show” what Abraham has to teach us. I expect it does, and although I am struggling to articulate precisely how, it will all hinge on our understanding of Kierkegaard’s notion of sin. However we got to where we are, whether it is the result of a fall from a prior state of innocence freely chosen or not, or an act of transgression against the universal fundamental to consciousness as such, or a consequence of language or knowledge itself, however we got here, we find ourselves in all of our particularity suspended outside the comprehensibility provided by the universal. We find ourselves as the very occurrence of the freedom undergone in anxiety and allowed for by the very gap between our concrete particularity and the abstract means we have at our disposal to express this particularity. We have ourselves as the task of performing this feat of translation, a task that we can, by means of the universal / linguist / rational powers we possess, only fail to do.

Although we find ourselves outside of the universal, this is not necessarily so, as it is in the case of Abraham, due to a direct divine command to sacrifice the ethical (although it could be), but rather the sacrifice of the ethical / universal is an act that as single individuals, as concrete particularities, we perform each time we speak, each time we attempt to communicate ourselves to another and even when we attempt to communicate ourselves to ourselves. It is sacrificed to the particularity that we cannot speak but yet cannot not speak. We find ourselves rather in a state where the universal has already been sacrificed through sin. But then shall we remain silent? Guilt seems to

¹⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, 124.

be the conscious awareness of our desire to assert our particularity as higher than the universal itself, an act that has been shown to be at its maximum state of intensity in the attempted silence of the demoniac. Although we are held outside of the universal, we cannot place ourselves in a position higher than it (although we attempt to do so and fail again every time we speak or desire to know/speak ourselves), but perhaps we can be placed there and perhaps this being placed there only happens when we stop trying to place ourselves. The demonic is said to be anxiety about the good and the good is claimed to signify “the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation or whatever one would call it.”¹⁵⁹ Again, the merman cannot get Angete, cannot be other than murderous desire without making the movement “on the strength of the absurd.”¹⁶⁰ But what would be the price of the exorcism of our demons, again what is the price of faith? If we have already entered the paradox, will we find our salvation or our damnation within it – if we have entered, we are not getting out since it is after all only where we have always been.

¹⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 119.

¹⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 125.

Conclusion

Aesthetic Pedagogy and the Fragmented Individual

The “crowd” is really what I have made my polemical target, and it was Socrates who taught me. I want to make people aware so that they don’t waste their lives and fritter them away... I want to call the crowd’s attention to their own ruin... And if they don’t want the good, I will compel them with the use of evil. One understands me or one doesn’t (Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*).¹

Individual existence is interpreted in terms of constellations in order to avoid definitions (Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*).²

Kierkegaard and Adorno are *maieutic* philosophers. The pedagogical dimension of significance present and active in the writings of both can be equated with the aesthetic. Adorno’s work can be seen to extend Kierkegaard’s project; namely, that of the communication of singularity as existential freedom and possibility, the truth of the particular as such, the fragment in existence that is the individual. The truth their work

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 255.

² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 162.

seeks to convey rests “in nothing else than the self-activity of personal appropriation, which the communication of a result tends to prevent.”³

If we could say that their work seeks to duplicate an aesthetic experience with writing, without having to say that the articulation of the truth of this experience is inseparable from its means of enactment, then it would be possible to identify this experience conceptually. Adorno and Kierkegaard offer up to the thought the challenge to think an aesthetic truth. Insofar as this study sought to capture and deliver this truth, it has become involved in the inseparability of its form from its deliverable content. As the work of this project progressed, it took the form of a constellation.

The sphere of the aesthetic must be played in order for it to be heard. Any effective communication between human beings, and by that I mean precisely the type that strikes and changes us deeply, always contains an element of the musical, is always a making of music, irregardless of the harmony or discord expressed. The communication of an awareness of the pursuit of our own collective and individual annihilation, as well as awareness of the possibility of it being otherwise, is at the core of the aesthetic knowledge their works display as their intended topic of instruction.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 216-217.

i. The Single Individual

Kierkegaard viewed the purpose of his authorship as a form of assault against the crowd. *The Present Age* answers the question of what he thought was at stake in his project of writing by making the claim that the “crowd,” understood as the “public,” simply put, does not exist, at least, that is, not in that strict and peculiar way Kierkegaard uses the word existence. “For leveling really to come about a phantom must first be provided, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing – this phantom is the public.”⁴ As the “spirit” of leveling, the phenomenon of “the public” is that abstraction through which the individual becomes separated from the experienced urgency of his or her own concrete existence, and, the “public” as such, can be understood as the concept marking the “spiritless,” “passionless” condition of the age. Kierkegaard granted existence only to the concrete and particular experience of being a self who recognizes itself as an activity of responsibility for meaning expressed in passionate and decisive choice. Such is Kierkegaard’s notion of inwardness. Yet, it is precisely the capacity for decision that the reflective age renders impotent: “... it is this urge to decision that reflection drives away or wants to banish” with the result that the individual “suffers the consequences in the form of an dyspeptic, abnormal common sense.” Kierkegaard’s project seeks to disrupt the dispiriting effects of this abstraction that common sense has come to identify with the normality of the everyday experience. In refusing to address this “phantom,” Kierkegaard’s writing becomes a struggle to communicate with and through the concrete experience of the single individual, that is, to communicate awareness of existence.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *A Literary Review*, trans. A. Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 80.

As existence, the self is possibility. Given the imprisoning structures of reflection that have a hold on both ourselves and the age, structures which reflection itself cannot “see,” this task of communication becomes a work of inordinate difficulty. Speaking directly, saying the words to you, “do not forget that you exist,” is not adequate to communicate existence. As an individual, the word “existence” adheres to particularity. As concretion, properly, it cannot become the object of knowledge and, thus, its linguistic description, while expressive of the truth of particularity, Kierkegaard’s subjective truth, will not serve to exhaust its possibility. Thus, the concretion of the individual offers the possibility of infinite expression, the salvation, as it were, of the particular within the absolute, to the exclusion of the ethical universal. Language and thought operate by means of conceptual abstraction; as a consequence, the lived experience of myself as the particular, possibly free, relation to the general, the limit, the form, the role through which I understand myself, and through which I am understood by others, cannot be conceptualized effectively. Subverting the reflective tendency of the present age involves the disruptive use of the limitations of language. Perhaps through a manipulative undermining of language’s ability to directly convey meaning, through a disruption of the assumed relationships between author and text, reader and text, language and meaning, that which is both beyond and before language, the experience of concrete subjectivity, shows itself indirectly through the exposure of possibility.

Leveling as a phenomenon levels the distinctions that had previously framed meaningful experience. In the reflective age, everything appears as the same, appearances are depleted of their particularity, experience itself, via the substitution of an abstraction for concretion, is stripped of the meaning. Experiential awareness of the

inescapability of representational consciousness, and with it, of the conceptual operations that are this consciousness' very conditions of possibility, is tantamount to the existential experience of one's own nothingness. It is a matter of perspective whether or not this nothingness is to be the source of a truth that would be the only thing it could be other than its own self-destruction. Regardless, in existential terror, in madness, in love, it is the possible that is encountered as the bonds of one's finitude as the inescapability of answering to the infinite. Kierkegaard identified the age wherein this nothingness becomes both unleashed upon the world and ignored simultaneously. In the nihilistic age of reflection, relationships become commodities, politics becomes entertainment, the lived world is transformed into a theater of distraction for the purpose of entertaining that "*monstrous nothing*" that is the public. The rise of the modern scientific point of view theoretically posited a split in experience (notably, Descartes' mind/body dualism) that eventually came to structure experience itself. The rational, when rationality is equated with either the quantifiable or the expressible as such, is enforced as the real. The world of experience becomes limited to the primary qualities of objects. Qualitative value is taken to be less real than the quantifiable, and becomes regulated to the realm of the *merely* subjective. Contra Kierkegaard, then, we have, from this perspective, the falsehood of subjectivity.

Unreflective common sense, that sedimented meaning of reflection comprising our everyday lived experience, that which Husserl named as our natural attitude, is the appropriation of the particularity of our experience by the abstract positioning of reflection. When the real is not only thought to be the rational but experienced as such, that which cannot be rendered transparent to reason, most notably the experience of

concrete subjectivity, gradually becomes a moment lost to experience. Existence forgets what it means to exist. Rather than experiencing ourselves through active and passionate struggle with decision, we become only capable of viewing ourselves from an abstract and detached point of view – we become the spectator of anonymity before the tragic stage of our enslavement to abstraction. Adorno and Horkheimer captured the mythos of Kierkegaard’s reflective age in their analysis of enlightenment rationality. They write:

the subsumption of the actual, whether under mythical prehistory or under mathematical formalism, the symbolic relating of the present to the mythical event in the rite or to the abstract category in science, makes the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old.⁵

Appearances, in other words, are robbed of their qualitative significance; that possibility attested to by experience stands, from us, at least twice removed. “Existence, thoroughly cleansed of demons and their conceptual descendents, takes on, in its gleaming naturalness, the numinous character which former ages attributed to demons;” this abstract machinery “makes souls into things.”⁶ Kierkegaard’s hope sets itself the task of holding open the possibility of the redemption of finitude; his hope is for the finite. In an age where the particular is sacrificed to the general, any claims of expression attempted in the name of particularity, any attempt to name, is subjected to the immediate laceration by the anonymous reflection of that non-existent, abstract subject that is Kierkegaard’s crowd. By diving ever further into particularity, even up to the point of the subject’s vanishing, we hope to the extent that we effectually undermine the mechanics of leveling.

⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 20.

⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, 21.

The antidote to the anonymity of reflection is found in the appropriative awareness of our pseudonymity.

The communication of the existential subject matter must take place undercover. Kierkegaard becomes intentionally “unrecognizable” in order to indirectly direct the individual toward an awareness of existence. He states: “the unrecognizables dare presume to help directly, to speak directly, to teach directly, to make the decision at the head of the crowd (instead of helping the individual towards the decision, where he himself is, supporting him negative.”⁷ But we should not forget “that reflection in, or by, itself is not something pernicious, that on the contrary its thorough working through is the condition of more intensive action.”⁸ If we have lost our immediate inherence in a greater and meaningful context through reflection, perhaps an awareness of this loss can be the occasion for the higher education of the individual. Thus, the concept of the public is propaedeutic: “an abstraction which in its abstract indifference, by repelling him [the individual] helps him to become wholly educated.” This education involves risk. Kierkegaard continues the prior sentence: “unless he is destroyed.”⁹

⁷ Kierkegaard, 97.

⁸ Kierkegaard, 99.

⁹ Kierkegaard, 82.

ii. Negative Dialectics

Negative dialectics is a style of thought amenable to the enlightenment. It attempts to stand with reason in its holding out against the irrational. It is an extension of the enlightenment's project of seeking to ground the epistemological within a critique of the limitations of the rational, and hence, it is an extension of the self-critique of reason. The critical stance of Kant takes a step further into itself, performs another reduction upon itself, in the dialectical appropriation it receives from Hegel. The operation of reason born out of the attempt to articulate the conditions necessary for the validity of the claims of modern science, as the unchanging structures of mind, the verifiable conditions for all possible experience, comes to produce the dialectical thought of the recognition of the historical determination of all claims to know. The manner by which enlightenment rationality makes a mistake in equating the real and the rational is in forgetting its own historical determination. Understood in this way, the dialectical transformation of critical philosophy might be thought to center around the task of the production of the recollection of our determinate awareness of finitude. Recollection, in this way, would be the movement of thought, the actuality of thought's potentiality precisely as possibility. The thought of absolute knowledge as the culmination of the dialectic within which the mind sees as much of itself in its object as it sees the object in itself is the thought beyond which thought is no longer possible. Dialectical thought does not come to a halt with this encounter with its limit point, but does always begin there against the

paradox of its own possibility with a desire to “discover something that thought itself cannot think.”¹⁰

Negative dialectics was born out of the examination of the dialectical structure of reason undertaken in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We are made privy to the self-destructive logic intrinsic to reason. The enlightenment project of the liberation of humanity from the compulsions of nature and the fears of superstition flounders in its historical inability to recognize its own limitations, to acknowledge its dependence upon the non-rational. Reason itself, in this way, becomes irrational and the project of human autonomy ends with the destruction of that which it sought to protect and develop: the possibility of possibility that is freedom. History is a process of its own transformation into the very conditions of necessity from which it meant to escape. What began in the first break of independent thought from its enclosure in myth ends, after having passed through the attempt to free itself from this enclosure, enclosing itself once more within the mythical, and this time the myth possesses enormous destructive force. The enlightenment produced self-consuming desire, desire for annihilation on a grand scale, and, simultaneously, the power to annihilate matter in a grand way, to split the atom, to annihilate the molecular structure of the real itself. Once reason becomes totalized and thus recognizes nothing outside of its strictly drawn borders, it transforms itself into myth. Differing little from the divine force of predetermination attributed once to the gods as destiny, rationality becomes a myth of itself and is emptied of its force of liberation. Totalitarian states easily fill in the hollow shell of freedom with the promise

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

of a collective madness. Rationality is transferred into the precision instruments of and administrated terror. Truth holds together a collective madness.

Negative dialectics is a way of thinking. It actively resists the administration of truth as terror. It is a mode of thinking that understands one's mode of thinking is a mode of life. Negative dialectics is that "melancholy science" Adorno undertakes as an offering to his friends of "the teaching of the good life." However neglected by modernity's emphasis on method, concrete life and its meaning remains the "true field of philosophy."¹¹ Negative dialectics is philosophy taking place within and dependent upon a culture of administrated ideology, of false-consciousness, of a falsified experience of subjectivity. It does not claim independence from its contextual source, but seeks to uncover suggestions of freedom's possibility. It allows the opening in thought engendered by these suggestions to become the operative source of its motion. Seeking to provoke awareness of the fissures of possibility within administrated experience is its revolutionary aim. The escape from the destructive dialectic of the enlightenment must begin with individual awareness of the nihilistic force at work in the construction of individuated experience. By directing attention to the sacrificial fate of the particular, negative dialectics hopes to stave off the redistribution of violence that comes in the wake of the overthrow of the irrational mythos of fascism by focusing our attention on the modern dialectical intertwinement of the rational and the inhumane. Negative dialectics seeks to not prolong the suffering of humanity by endlessly thinking it being otherwise only in the negative. This way of thinking addresses suffering, hopes for its alleviation,

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 15.

and carves a possible space for genuine pleasure in its stead. It is, in this way, that negative utopianism is hedonism.

Negative dialectics is an attempt to think a pure materialism. The purity of a materialist form of thought stems from its concern to weigh itself against the reality of suffering. The claim on thought made by the anguished scream of the torture victim challenges the instrumental operations of the rational. It is the claim of the particular in its absolute worth that enlightenment rationality and fascist irrationality both suppress with the administrated instrumentalization of reality. Dialectical thought comes to recognize its own nihilistic structure, its necessary participation in the negation of the now to the not-yet, the particular to the general, the concrete to the abstract. Becoming aware of this participation, thought is becoming aware of itself in its becoming, in its development within and conditioning therewith the historical and finite. Awareness of limitation does not itself presuppose transcendence. It is the critical awareness of the philosopher, an active holding out in thought for the possibility of the not-yet, the unthought, the impossible. Negative dialectics is thought turned on the moment that the inner is the outer and the outer the inner precisely and only to the extent that the inner never be fully postulated in the outer, nor the outer fully appropriated by the interior operatives of the mind. “If thinking is to be true today – it must also be a thinking against itself.”¹² Representational consciousness with its attendant moment of the assertion of its own validity, that is, its capacity to represent, form an image, of something other than itself, is a constructed illusion the lived reality of which is not dispelled once its

¹² Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 365.

operations are made known. Critical thought seeks to think itself in the mode of its own self-negation, seeks to come to show itself its own undermining.

Negative dialectics is an attempt to think a pure materialism. The purity of a materialist form of thought stems from its avoidance of naturalistic or sociological dogmatism. Negative dialectics offers no categorical principle from which everything that could be is produced, nor to which all could be reduced; matter, nature, history are not thought in such a way that they come to represent an immediate given behind which or before which all inquiry comes to a halt. Negative dialectics ventures thought with no first principle, with no absolute; only the negative demand of the reality of suffering, the wound in thought, serves as its signpost. If a materialist thought take no recourse to the transcendental or metaphysical and looks for accounts within the world of our collective history, negative dialectics extends the materialist impulse into the experiential realm of the philosopher, to the experience of conceptual thought. It wishes to think about that which escapes conceptuality, and thus is a thought of the extreme. It asks the question of possibility. "If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims."¹³ The extremity beyond the concept is marked with the aporetic naming of the non-identical. As the force of the non-identical, thought is negative dialectics. Negative Dialectics understands that truth is never truly found by seeking the most common denominator, the average or mean, of a given matter. On the contrary, truth if found is to be found in the extreme. Adorno's understanding of the Hegelian dialectic and its process of mediation leads to the realization. Negative

¹³ Adorno, 365.

dialectics involves an intensification of the antagonistic elements of dialectical thinking, while at the same time, involves downplaying, even disproving the truth claims of the mediating conciliation of contraries performed by Hegel's thought and typically thought to be of greatest significance. For negative dialectics, mediation is understood to refer to the dialectical constitutive process of the object. An object's identity is product of its process of differentiation against that which it is not; an object has its other in itself in differentiating itself from the other so that the more it is itself the more it is, simultaneously, not itself. The act of exclusion invariably and inadvertently is one of inclusion. Hullot-Kentor points out that since this is seen most clearly at the point of its highest intensity, it makes of exaggeration much more than rhetorical ploy: that is, it is "reality's own route to the truth to which dialectical thinking relentlessly devotes itself."¹⁴ For Hullot-Kentor, negative dialectics is negative in one way because it is no longer a dialectics of progress. It is the critique of any first principles and continually transforms meaning into the expression of transience. Adorno asks us to think the possibility of a thought which would not be the sacrifice of the particular to the universal, but the revelation of the a-conceptual with the use of concepts. Is this only possible with the use of the aesthetic?

¹⁴ Robert Hullot-Kentor, forward to his translation of Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xviii.

iii: Parting Remarks on the Communication of Possibility

Contact with indeterminacy is the “how” of the communication of possibility. Communication of the possible subsists in and through affectivity. A successful communion effectuates the transubstantiation of the aesthetic into the Holy. We are aware of this moment as the possibility known in anxiety, as the possibility of the transcendent validation of existence. Transcendence experienced in this way is that of its negativity. It is not the actuality of the transcendent. As experienced, its form remains bound to the state of its own self-interrogation. Kierkegaard’s insight is that the transcendent that would form the assured grounding of the finite within infinite significance, God, strictly speaking, does not exist. Kierkegaard’s faith is not in the existence of God; rather, as an undergoing of self consciousness’ self-relating through its relation to that which it is not, to that alterity, which admits of no direct evidence, existence is inclusive of God *a priori* in the paradoxical form of his exclusion. Thus, the self-awareness, the motion of the self that Kierkegaard’s texts seeks to convey, becomes an awareness of one’s constitutive relation to God, one’s dependence, as it were, on his absence. The resulting existential awareness becomes aware of its constitutive relation to absence as the question of the possibility of the impossible, perhaps even a calling out for its affirmation. Paradox is the form and content of faith. The measure of the question’s answer is the courage of passion to face and affirm our dependence upon the incomprehensible; the anxious paradox claimed by Kierkegaard to be thought’s passion is the substance of faith. The possibility of transcendence could only ever be, if and only if it is forever held open by our declaration of its impossibility. In this sense, affirmation of the possible is attained through affirmation of the impossible. The movement within the

self initiated by contact with the indeterminate that is the communication of possibility does not appear self-sustaining, nor does the movement appear to originate in the self, but gives itself in the form of the request of faith, the calling to make of our individual life's instantiations of the ideal. If there is evidence of the beyond to be drawn from the initial disruption of the encounter with possibility, it is only of the moment of this interrogation.

The paradox of possibility is that its actuality is contingent upon its non-being, its never coming to be, upon, that is, the affirmation of the impossible. The moment of affirmation is that of an affirmative nihilism. It is the negative that is affirmed. The structure of self-consciousness, like that of discursive knowledge, is sacrificial. We are aware of ourselves as filtered through abstract universals of identification, all of which operate via a negation of the particular in service to its becoming comprehensible to itself. To become comprehensible that particular is more than willing to destroy itself. For this operation to succeed in its proliferation of the despair and meekness of the human spirit, it must not become too aware of itself as a force of negation. To the extent that we become aware of the negative as a constituent force of subjectivity, we become aware of the opacity of ourselves before ourselves. The coherency of experience is dependent upon its blindness to its origins. A full affirmation of negation would be the moment of experienced transcendence, the total affirmation of the irreducibility of the incomprehensible. The boundary between thought and expression is an experiential knowledge; it only exists. Existence cannot be comprehended as we can never fully sever ourselves from the coherency provided to our experience by it being embedded in the universals of language. In Adorno's words, all that can be said here, in conclusion is

that “this transcendence *is*, and at the same time *is not* – and beyond that contradiction it is no doubt very difficult, and probably impossible, for thought to go.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 144.

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