On Occasion of the public Defence of the Dissertation:

Thought in Image: Søren Kierkegaard's Poetics[1]

Isak Winkel Holm

> *"The Apolline phenomena in which Dionysus is objectified are no longer 'a boundless sea, a changing weft, a glowing life' like the music of the chorus is; they are not only those powers that the inspired worshipper of Dionysus merely feels and does not condense into an image, in which he feels the closeness of the god. Now, the clarity and solidity of the epic form speak to him from the stage."*
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche[2]

Søren Kierkegaard does not have a theory of aesthetics, if by this one means a coherent philosophical system concerning the fine arts. To be sure, his pseudonymous works in particular are teeming with concepts and themes from art theory, a fact which points to Kierkegaard's acquaintance with the aesthetic theories of his day – above all with those of Hegel and the Hegelians – but these desultory remarks on art and literature are really nothing more than what Kierkegaard himself once called "flotsam from various aestheticians".[3] It is even astounding how often Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms fail to understand the very theorists from which they have beachcombed their ideas.[4]

In Kierkegaard's authorship, however, one can also find, side by side with clichés borrowed from textbooks on art theory, another set of more sophisticated reflections about aesthetics. Here, Kierkegaard is not offering a theoretical discussion of the beautiful work of art but is instead trying to get hold of his own complicated activity as an author. In order to keep these two aspects separate, I will propose calling all that which pertains to Kierkegaard's traditional art theory Kierkegaard's aesthetics while dubbing his reflections upon his own writing Kierkegaard's poetics.

By poetics I mean, obviously, a reflection upon literature (as opposed to a theory of art in general), but more specifically I use poetics as a name for an author's attempt to articulate some of his more intuitive and practical experiences with his writing. What I call Kierkegaard's poetics consists of a handful of recurring concepts and literary figures by which Kierkegaard attempts to paint a picture of his concrete experiences with his work as an author. Thus, Kierkegaard's poetics is not an explicit theory that can be summed up and discussed; rather, it is an implicit poetological layer within the text which must be laboriously laid bare through hermeneutical excavation.

Let me now characterize the three theses that I put forward in my doctoral dissertation, *Thought in Image. Søren Kierkegaard's poetics*. As my first thesis, I suggest that Kierkegaard's poetics consists of his attempts to deal with the unbeautiful dissonance between meaning and material in aesthetic production rather than simply a paying homage to the harmony of a beautiful work of art. As my second thesis, I claim that the aesthetic material which, according to Kierkegaard, turns the aesthetic production into a disharmonic process has to be conceived of as a blend of sensual imagination and history. As my third thesis, finally, I advance the notion that Kierkegaard's poetics not only has a literary or aesthetic relevance, but also plays an important role within Kierkegaard's central philolosophical efforts. Since the two last theses are, in effect, developments upon the first one, I will only touch upon them briefly here.

The Sirens of the Sea

As I said, Kierkegaard's poetics is not simply articulated in pure philosophical concepts but is rather expressed in literary images. Thus, it is a "Thought in Image". For the present, I will confine myself to one particular literary image, an image which shows Kierkegaard the author at his virtuoso best. The image is to be found in the Aesthete A's treatise on Mozart from *Either/Or* (1843) where it functions as a paradoxical revelation of Don Juan's invisible sensuality:

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

> that set the waves in motion, and yet it is, conversely, the swelling waves that form them. Thus, *Don Juan* is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency, an individual who is continually being formed but is never finished, about whose history one grasps nothing except by listening to the noise of the waves. When *Don Juan* is comprehended in this way, there is meaning and deep significance in everything.[5]

Within Kierkegaard scholarship, the Aesthete's treatise on Mozart is usually read as a theory of erotic desire that gives an account of the various stages in a subject's development. Such an interpretation is useful in this case, too. As can be shown by the journals where it is recorded that this image of turbulence has as its source an engraving which Kierkegaard encountered quite by accident in a mythological lexicon as early as 1837 (see the illustration). This engraving depicts the so-called *"Wellenmädchen"*, literally "maidens of the waves", a name invented by the author of a German lexicon to describe certain sea-nymphs in Norse mythology known as "maidens of the sea" [*"havmøer"*] or "daughters of Ægir" [*"ægirsdøtre"*], a Nordic sea-god.[6] In his first comment on Vollmer's illustration, Kierkegaard interprets it as an allegory of "the entire period in childhood when the individual has separated himself out so little from the whole that he says: *"me hit horsey"*.[7] And there is nothing to prevent us from interpreting the oscillating siren Don Juan in the same way, that is, as a *mise-en-scène* of the first, as yet unconscious, stage on desire's way to self-consciousness.

However, it is not merely possible, but also necessary, to supplement this psychological interpretation with an aesthetic one, given that Don Juan is not only "an individual who is continually being formed", but also "a *picture* that is continually coming into view". Such an aesthetic interpretation is supported by the unobtrusive "one" who is mentioned at the conclusion of the passage and who takes the position of an observer with an intention of "grasping" something about Don Juan's story. The image does not merely have to do with *who* Don Juan is, but also with how his sensual genius ought to be represented in the medium of art in order that "one" can truly obtain a representation of it.

The Aesthete continues by placing an emphasis on the fact that one will never be in a position to grasp something about Don Juan's essence if one insists upon seeing him as a self-conscious and clearly delineated individual: "I think about a single individual; I see him, or I hear him

speak, and then it becomes something comic that he has seduced 1003." If the moving images of waves are in the position to give one a sense of having grasped Don Juan's essence, then it is due to their showing him not as a finished *product* but rather as an unfinished aesthetic *production*.

This dynamic aspect is emphasized by the phrase "is formed" [the Danish verb *"danne"*] which is used three times in the course of this rather short text. According to the Aesthete, the unfinished aesthetic process of formation, which can be seen on the surface of the sea, is a "musical oscillation". He has found this expression in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in a chapter describing how the tone, the materiality of music, arises from the oscillations within physical objects. Hegel offers a philosophical interpretation of this evident acoustic fact by saying that the tone "so to speak liberates the ideal meaning from its confinement within the material."[8] The Aesthete subscribes to Hegel's formulation,[9] but he twists it in such a way that the musical oscillation comes to signify an aesthetic process of formation, in which the meaningful figure sets about liberating itself from the meaningless and material roar of the waves. One could say that the wave image represents the birth of a meaning-laden figure on the confinium between chaos and form.

Employing a concept of the early German Romantics, such a text which outlines its own creation within its own image, can be termed the poetry of poetry. According to Friedrich Schlegel, such transcendental poetry [*"Transzendentalpoesie"*] is a kind of self-reflective poetry, which can "also represent the producing together with the product", and hence is able to "co-represent itself in all its representations, and thus in every aspect be at one and the same time poetry *and* the poetry of poetry."[10] Novalis' definition runs parallel to Schlegel's, for he also speaks of making a picture "which is painted in such a way that it paints itself."[11] Not just with the wave image, but also in many other of his sophisticated textual images, Kierkegaard, a fierce critic of the Romantics, actualizes the Romantic ideal of the poetry of poetry. These images are not merely offering a picture of a particular object, they are also painting their own creation process upon the surface of the picture. Furthermore, in all of these images, it is precisely the fact that there remains an unfocused spot in the background – here, it is the foam and the roar of the waves, but elsewhere in Kierkegaard's work it might be the mistiness of rolling fog, the unarticulated murmur of thunder, the tangled roots of a white water-lily, the noise of the street, or the moving of drapery covering a lamp – which indicates a place of origin within the image.

Aesthetic negativity

The wave image, as an example of Romantic transcendental poetry, has connections to the extensive reflections on aesthetic theory found in the surrounding text. Early on in the treatise on Mozart, the Aesthete makes himself known as a faithful disciple of Hegel by reusing the theoretical flotsam of Hegel and such Hegelians as H.G. Hotho and J.L. Heiberg. In Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the beautiful is defined as the appearance of a supersensual meaning in a sensual material.[12] According to Hegel, the idea obtains its most perfect form of sensual representation in classical art, and this representation is found, first and foremost, in Greek sculpture, in which Hegel finds a perfect congruence between the spiritual and sensual aspects of art, between aesthetic meaning and aesthetic material. The Aesthete A repeats this Hegelian theory by defining a work of art as "the medium through which the idea becomes visible" (III 54), and by writing that "only where the idea is brought to rest and transparency in a definite form, can there be any question of a classic work" (Ibid.). It is this kind of observation that I have chosen to call Kierkegaard's aesthetics.

Yet, at the same time, the wave image reveals a rather different insight concerning aesthetic theory. In this regard, the Aesthete emphasizes twice that the idea which appears on the surface of the sea never becomes visible in a clear and definite form. Don Juan is "a picture that is continually coming into view *but does not attain form and consistency*, an individual who is continually being formed *but is never finished*". That the image of Don Juan cannot arise out of the waves is the result of the clamorous motion of the sea negating any harmonic, completed form. The material of the waves is thus not the beautiful artwork's transparent medium which compliantly manifests ideal meaning. Rather, it is an impenetrable noise which sabotages the movement toward meaning and forces this movement to constantly begin again.

In *The Seducer's Diary*, Johannes uses one of the epithets of Aphrodite to describe Cordelia, saying that "she is constantly [*bestandig*] an Anadyomene".[13] Such a formulation does not seem alarming at first sight; but it is, in fact, radical: for to constantly be an Anadyomene is really to be a kind of Aphrodite, who is never allowed to rise up fully formed from the foam, as does, for instance, the Venus of Botticelli; rather, it means to remain trapped in oscillation on the boundary between noise and meaning. In just the same way, the foam-born Don

Juan remains "constantly" – *"bestandig"* – trapped in his unfinished process of birth.[14]

In what I call his aesthetics, Kierkegaard considers the beautiful forms found within "the sphere of pure poetry" (II 104), where ideal meaning comes into view in a compliant material. However, in his poetological images (as, for example, the image of waves), he is interested in what might be called a sphere of "impure" poetry. Here, aesthetic meaning has only partly liberated itself from the aesthetic material, and thus still remains dependent upon it. Correspondingly, in *The Concept of Irony* (1841) Kierkegaard remarks that literary production takes place in a "neither-nor-ness [*"Hverkenhed"*]" or an "intermediate state [*Mellemtilstand*]", in which the spirit of the author is neither entirely free from its aesthetic material, nor entirely bound to it (II 101). Rather, literary production proceeds forward laboriously, partway between freedom and bondage.

I want to propose the concept of aesthetic negativity as a name for the unfinished and unfinishable aesthetic process in which meaning is constantly sabotaged and irritated, such that it is not able to liberate itself from the non-meaning-filled material of art. Thus, my concept of negativity is not a concept of substance, but a concept of process. In other words, negativity does not refer to the *material*, which blocks the constitution of aesthetic meaning (in this case, the foam of the waves), but rather designates the *mode* in which the constitution of meaning is carried on. When a process of aesthetic production and reception is not in a position to achieve a harmonious and meaningful form, but persists unfinished and unfinishable, I propose to call such a mode a negative process.

However, the Aesthete's insight into aesthetic negativity is not just that Don Juan's appearance on the surface of the sea is characterized by negative processuality, but also, and more radically, that this negativity is a condition for pushing onward to a deeper level of meaning. He writes expressively that one can only get a grasp on Don Juan's story by "listening to the noise of the waves". At the end of the wave image, the Aesthete repeats the dialectical relation between the non-meaning-filled noise of the waves and meaning: for it is only when Don Juan is "held fast" within his oscillation on the sea's surface that "there is meaning and deep significance in everything". One could deem this aesthetic negativity dialectical, not in a Hegelian sense (as if negativity could be sublated without any remainder into a meaning of a higher order), but rather by

virtue of the recalcitrant material's tendency to irritate and stimulate motion toward meaning at one and the same time. According to the Aesthete, aesthetic negativity is both a troublesome hindrance and a necessary condition for aesthetic meaning.

Less than a century after Kierkegaard, Paul Valéry writes in a collection of fragments entitled *Rhumbs* (1926) that the "poet is one who gets his ideas from the difficulties inherent in art – he is not one whom such difficulties defeat".[15] A few pages later, Valéry emphasizes the dialectical relation between material difficulties and meaningful ideas by defining poetry as the "extended hesitation between sound and meaning".[16] Thus, Valéry describes literary production not as the absolute mastery of meaning over its material, as, for example, does Hegel (and Kierkegaard right along with him in his aesthetics), but rather as a negative process – a hesitation – taking place partway between the artwork's non-meaning-filled materiality and its meaning.

Valéry's aphorism about poetry's hesitation reverberates through many of this century's more prominent theories on aesthetics, even in the work of such central figures as Roman Jakobson and Martin Heidegger,[17] but in my dissertation I subscribe first and foremost to Theodor W. Adorno's formulation of negative aesthetics. In his essay "Valéry's Deviations" [*"Valérys Abweichungen"* (1960)], Adorno singles out Valéry for "the importance which he gives the recalcitrant material" in the process of aesthetic production.[18] And in his posthumously published masterwork, *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), Adorno carefully places a similar weight upon art's recalcitrant materials and writes that the artist's compositional rationality ought not to win a merely "Pyrrhic victory" over a material which makes no resistance. Thus, Adorno is able to describe the authentic artwork as a crystallization process – a hesitation – within the domain of tension between spirit and its recalcitrant Other.[19]

In short, I suggest that Kierkegaard in his poetics can be interpreted as a transition figure between an idealist aesthetics and a certain kind modernist aesthetics, which can be dubbed negative aesthetics. When the Aesthete makes Don Juan oscillate constantly like an Anadyomene between meaningful form and non-meaningfilled noise, he anticipates the hesitation between meaning and sound, between the aesthetic spirit and its material Other, which Valéry and his followers attribute to the nature of poetry, and thus, it is also due to what I call Kierkegaard's poetics.

Perspectives

I can now sum up my first thesis. First of all, I suggest that in Kierkegaard's authorship there can be found a kind of poetological reflection which – against the grain of the art theories of his day – deals with the inherent negativity of the aesthetic production. Second, I claim that it is due to this poetics of the unbeautiful, and not Kierkegaard's aesthetics of the beautiful, that his authorship becomes relevant for modern discussions of art. My two remaining theses branch out from the first one. In my second thesis, I claim that the refractory aesthetic material which turns literary production into a negative process has a double nature, and that this doubleness can be explained in virtue of Kierkegaard's background in the philosophy of his time. Succinctly put, one might say that the foundations for Kierkegaard's poetics lie in the contemporary aesthetic theories of his day, which consisted of equal portions of Kant and Hegel (with the caveat that Kierkegaard appears to have only an indirect knowledge of Kant's aesthetics as acquired through Schlegel and his fellow Romantics). If we transpose the poetological problem from Kierkegaard's text onto his theoretical background in Kant and Hegel, we get two different answers to the question of how to understand the negativity inherent in the aesthetic production process.

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant describes the beautiful as a temporal healing of a transcendental rift between two faculties of mind, imagination and reason, sensual form and intellectual concept. The undeveloped tendencies toward a theory of aesthetic negativity that can be found in Kant are describing a violent torrent of sensual forms which dissolve an artwork's meaningful coherence into tumultuous insanity or nonsense.[20] In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel interprets art as being a moment in the world spirit's historical development. Therefore, the task of the individual artist is to rework and refine a historically given material. The Greek artist, for instance, must use as his starting point the remnants of the previous art form: namely, symbolic art. Within this theoretical framework, aesthetic negativity is not caused by the sensual wealth created by the Kantian faculty of imagination; rather, it is due to the sedimented meanings which lie already embedded in the material the artist finds at hand.

This difference can be illustrated by employing the recurrent metaphors of the two above-mentioned philosophers. According to Kant, aesthetic negativity is caused by imagination's proliferating foliation, its tendency toward organic and fecund foliation; according to Hegel, by

contrast, aesthetic negativity is due to the uneven historical foundations crafted out of collapsed rubble. In Kierkegaard, these two themes – and their recurring metaphors – are superimposed, and this gives rise to my second thesis: namely, that if the producing spirit cannot liberate itself from the aesthetic material, it is, according to Kierkegaard, because in this very material there is to be found an alloy of the overwhelming forms of imagination and the sedimented meanings of history. In Kierkegaard's work, both the light foliation of the arabesque and the heavy rubble of the symbol sabotage the movement of the text toward aesthetic meaning.

In my third and final thesis, I advance the idea that Kierkegaard's poetological reflections not only have a literary or aesthetic relevance, but they also play an important role within Kierkegaard's most essential philosophical efforts, i.e., within the realm of the philosophy of subjectivity. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), the pseudonym Johannes Climacus writes that existing is a somewhat "intermediate state" [*"Mellemtilstand"*], something that is suitable for an "intermediate being" as man, who is composed of both the spiritual and the sensual, the eternal and the temporal, the infinite and the finite (XI,1 329). It is indeed difficult to conceive of a more traditional characterization of a human being, but what is special about Climacus' description is his insinuation that this composition can be the source of existential negativity: "That negativity that is in existence, or rather the negativity of the existing subject [...], is grounded in the subject's synthesis, in his being an existing infinite spirit" (XII,1 82). Thus, the fact that existence is marked by negativity is due to infinite spirit's inability to liberate itself from its finite half, since it is, as Climacus points out, "lodged in existence" (XII,1 208).

Climacus defines this existential negativity as processuality or, in his own terms, as "becoming" [*"Vorden"*]. The existing human being is never able to achieve a finished and completed result, because the movement of the spirit toward transcendent meaning is constantly being sabotaged and irritated by its own refractory finite flesh.

The reason why I advance this shorthand résumé of Kierkegaard's anthropology is in order to highlight the conspicuous similarity between aesthetic negativity (which plays a decisive role in Kierkegaard's early authorship), on the one hand, and existential negativity (which becomes a central theme in Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence), on the other. What Kierkegaard says about the *producing spirit* falls right in line with what he says about the *existing spirit:* both must move forward within an

"intermediate state," a "neither-nor-ness" between spiritual meaning and recalcitrant sensual concretion. Thus, my third thesis is that one can observe an analogy between Kierkegaard's poetological thinking and his anthropological thinking, and that this analogy results in a reciprocal interchange between what are normally conceived as two separate philosophical realms.

Conclusion

The three theses which I have presented here – on aesthetic negativity, on the double nature of the refractory aesthetic material, and on the analogy between Kierkegaard's poetology and his anthropology, respectively – can be combined so as to say something about how one should understand the concept of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's authorship. Philosophical readings of Kierkegaard tend to describe Kierkegaard's various literary strategies as mere superficial packaging of his existential and philosophical content. By contrast, Adorno, along with more recent deconstructive Kierkegaard readers, has pointed out how the text's literary devices oppose Kierkegaard's philosophical intentions and dissolve the philosophic doxa in ironic self-contradiction. By examining the poetological reflections found in Kierkegaard's earlier authorship, I have attempted to show that the aesthetic cannot be understood in its fullest sense if it is viewed as either inessential packaging or as means of eviscerating the text of its philosophical meaning. Rather, aesthetic problems make up an essential and original domain of Kierkegaard's thinking; a domain in which he wrestles with the shape of central concepts such as negativity, freedom, and historicity.

Notes

1. The Ph.D. dissertation in question is published in a moderately reworked form as *Tanken i billedet. Søren Kierkegaards poetik*, København: Gyldendal 1998.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, London: Penguin 1993, p. 45.
3. *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987-1995. References hereafter in the text with volume and page number. In this case XII,1 518 (translation slightly reworked).
4. I am not alone in judging Kierkegaard harshly as a theoretician of aesthetics: "The aesthetic distinctions and theories which are encountered in the Kierkegaardian production do not deviate significantly from the material in the aesthetic works Kierkegaard obviously studied. In other words, Kierkegaard has no aesthetic theory of his own in the sense that he introduces radical new theories into the aesthetic domain." Lars Bejerholm, *Meddelelsens dialektik. Studier i Søren Kierkegaards teorier om språk, kommunikation och pseudonymitet*, Lund 1962, p. 72. Th.W. Adorno writes something quite similar in *Kierkegaard. Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. However, both Bejerholm and Adorno overlook the originality of what I am calling Kierkegaard's poetics.
5. III 92, (translation slightly reworked).
6. According to Vollmer's definition the sirens are "captivating creatures, who arose out of the Nordic poets' imaginations [...], and who swim in the stormy sea around their mother and pop up out of the waves graced by a drape of white." Dr. W. Vollmer, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch der Mythologie aller Nationen*, Stuttgart 1836, p. 1537. Kierkegaard comments upon Vollmer's "maidens of the sea" for the first time on January 7th, 1837, calling them "Bølgepiger" and developing his ideas concerning them about three weeks later (see *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, second augmented edition by Niels Thulstrup, København 1968, I A 319 and I C 126).
7. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, I A 319.
8. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1970ff, vol. 13, p. 121.
9. Earlier on in the treatise, the Aesthete repeats Hegel's own words nearly verbatim by establishing the fact that with music "that which is really supposed to be heard is continually [*bestandig*] disengaging itself from the sensuous" (III 68).
10. Athenäumfragment nr. 238, in: Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente. Studienausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler and Hans Eichner, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 1988, vol. 2, p. 127.
11. Novalis, *Schriften*, ed. by Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz, Stuttgart 1960, vol. 2, p. 110.
12. Formulated with a well-known formula, the beautiful is "the sensual appearance of the idea", Hegel, *op. cit.*, vol. 13, p. 151. The sentence can be found and read in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, but according to recent research we cannot be sure that it is actually written by Hegel himself. It is more likely that the famous phrase has been added during Gustav Hotho's editing of the lecture manuscripts. The Hegel-scholar Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert reviews the philological problems surrounding the lectures on aesthetics in "Ästhetik oder Philosophie der Kunst. Die Nachschriften und Zeugnisse zu Hegels Berliner Vorlesungen", in: *Hegel-Studien*, vol. 26, Bonn 1991.
13. III 425. Translation modified.
14. A "morphogenetic" reading of Aphrodite's birth in many ways similiar to my own can be found in Georges Didi-Huberman, "La couleur d'écume. Ou le paradoxe d'Apelle",

i: Critique, no. 467-470, Paris 1986, and in Michel Serres, *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce*, Paris 1977, pp. 167-193.

15. "Est poète celui auquel la difficulté inhérente à son art donne des idées, – et ne l'est pas celui auquel elle les retire", Paul Valéry, *Rhumbs*, in: *Oeuvres*, Paris: Pléïade, 1957-60, vol. 2, p. 627.
16. "La poésie – cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens" ("Poetry – that prolonged hesitation between the sound and the sense", Valéry, *op. cit.*, 637.)
17. See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960), i: *Language in literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, London: The Belknap Press, 1987, p. 81. And Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlins Erde und Himmel" (1959), in: *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1971, p. 152ff.
18. Theodor W. Adorno, "Valérys Abweichungen", in: *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973, vol. 11, p. 172.
19. Adorno, Ästhetische Theorie, in: Gesammelte Schriften, 7,138. My reading of Adorno is inspired by the German theorist of aesthetics, Christoph Menke, who in *Die Suveränität der Kunst. Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (second revised edition: Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991) develops an aesthetics of negativity based upon both Adorno's concept of the process-character of the work of art and Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance".
20. A stimulating discussion of Kant's theory of nonsense is to be found in Winfried Menninghaus' *Lob des Unsinns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1995, p. 27.

Aesthetic Negativity

Response to Isak Winkel Holm

Arne Melberg

I am presenting here a condensed version of my contribution to the public defense of Isak Winkel Holm's dissertation on Kierkegaard's poetics,[1] concentrating on his discussion of "aesthetic negativity". This concept has much to say in the dissertation being regarded as fundamental to Kierkegaardian "poetics". Aesthetic negativity is determined as a "process" emanating from the materiality and historicity of art and in conflict with the intended meaning of an aesthetics regarded as harmony and beauty. According to Isak Winkel Holm's thesis (p. 28) aesthetic negativity is due to "the sedimented meaning of history" producing an immanent conflict in Kierkegaard's writings as a "discord between the philosophically abstract and the literary concrete" – and it is materiality and historicity that is producing the "concrete" negativity that is making havoc with philosophical abstractions.

Isak Winkel Holm is granting Kierkegaard a decisive historical importance turning a classical "affirmative" aesthetics, here represented by Kant and Hegel, into a modern aesthetic negativity, represented by Nietzsche, Adorno, Blanchot, Derrida. Modern Hegel-readers, like Adorno and Derrida, are attentive to the "negativity in the linguistic meaning-formation by focusing on the material resistance of writing, grammar and sound" (p. 68). Adorno's aesthetic negativity is based on the "literal" character of the material and Isak Winkel Holm is borrowing some wordings from the contemporary German philosopher-aesthetician Christoph Menke in order to conjoin Adorno's "literal" view of aesthetic material with Derrida's "différance" into the "structural law of the process of aesthetic experience" (p. 88). The aesthetic negativity to be found in Kierkegaard is however not only a matter of aesthetic experience, according to Isak Winkel Holm, but based on aesthetic "work" and must be understood as "a characteristic of the difficult movement of thought in the material of the text" (p. 89).

It is this positively enthusiastic use of "negativity" that I want to criticize. It cannot, according to my judgment, work as a characteristic of modern aesthetics from Nietzsche to Derrida without severe qualifications; it is based on far too loose determinations of negativity; and it is riskily stylizing a history of aesthetics running from affirmation to negation thereby giving Kierkegaard an idealized position. My critique will come out in two parts, one general and one specific.

1. Kierkegaard is presented as a "transitional figure between a classical and a modern aesthetics" (p. 23). His writing "make a new way" for the history of aesthetics (p. 21) and forebodes the decisive modernization in the negative sense installed by Nietzsche. Such is the thesis. It is easy to accept Isak Winkel Holm's promotion of negativity in Kierkegaard in the sense that he is a dialectical thinker and negativity is apparently decisive when it comes to dialectics. Christoph Menke, who provides Isak Winkel Holm with some of his major arguments, is very much a dialectical thinker in the German tradition with a tendency to situate whatever he finds in a dialectical machinery run by negativity. His determinations of aesthetic negativity seem to me loose enough to make room for such dialectical imperialism. In the beginning of his *Die Souveränitet der Kunst* he simply states that "aesthetic difference", i.e. the difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, is aesthetic negativity. This difference he localizes primarily in aesthetic experience but towards the end of his book he does not hesitate to derive aesthetic negativity from "the semiotic structure of representation", thereby including aesthetic materiality as well as reception in his notion of negativity. In an essay much used by Isak Winkel Holm, Menke talks about two basic determinations of aesthetic negativity, the first one based on the hermeneutical observation that interpretations never end, the second on the "literal" character of aesthetic material, what Isak Winkel Holm would call the "concrete" and "material" character of the text.[2]

Menke's aesthetic negativity finds in other words room for aesthetic production, process and reception, making the notion of negativity so all-including that it loses its analytical value and, in my opinion, becomes misleading to the point of being meaningless. Isak Winkel Holm seems however to accept this very general notion, adding his own idea of the historicity of the negative and making Kierkegaard into a breaking-point between the old and the new.

But is it meaningful to gather traditional aesthetics under the head-

ing "affirmative" and modern aesthetics under the heading "negative"? I can accept the significance of negativity for dialectics in general and when it comes to Adorno, for instance. But that would mean that also Hegel comes under the spell of the negative, rather than being "affirmative". (It should be mentioned that Isak Winkel Holm only has one reference, p. 63, to Hegel supporting his idea of Hegel's "affirmative" aesthetics. In this passage of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, however, Hegel is characterizing "classical" art as "affirmative" in contrast to "modern"). On the other hand it seems strange to me to characterize, for instance, Nietzsche and Derrida in terms of the negative. Listen to this late Nietzsche-fragment:

> What is essential in art remains its perfection of existence, its production of perfection and plenitude; art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence* – What does a *pessimistic art* signify? Is it not a contradictio? – Yes. – Schopenhauer is *wrong* when he puts certain works of art in the service of pessimism. /.../ There is no such thing as pessimistic art – Art affirms.[3]

Nietzsche actually initiates an *affirmative* aesthetics continued in our time by for instance Derrida, who – contrary to Isak Winkel Holm's presentation – is no dialectician. Rather, he is finding Yes more fundamental than No, so to speak. Confirmation of this can be found all over his philosophy, strikingly for instance in his discussion of the two Yes-es, that conclude Joyce's *Ulysses*.[4] (I actually wrote Derrida asking for his views on being classified as "negative" when it comes to aesthetics. He answered among other things that "as for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche the word 'negative' would be the last for me to use. /.../ Affirmation has for me always been more original as well as more powerful. /.../ I rather relate negativity to Hegel and to dialectics").

It seems that we glimpse another kind of history, where negativity belongs to classical dialectics while modern aesthetics in the Nietzsche-tradition would be based on affirmation. But the question is if it is meaningful to make history out of these categories at all. If negativity really is an aesthetic "structural law" (Isak Winkel Holm, based on Menke, p. 88), then it cannot make sense to restrict aesthetic negativity to modernity, because that would mean that pre-modern art is no art at all, and that pre-modern aestheticians, like Kant and Hegel (but are they really pre-modern?) have simply misunderstood the art (if it is art) they are working with.

2. I will try to specify my critique of Isak Winkel Holm's handling of negativity by way of the example discussed in ch. 5 of the dissertation: Kierkegaard's analysis of *Don Juan* in *Either-Or*, a chapter where Isak Winkel Holm wants to convince us that Kierkegaard's poetics is a negation of the theory of aesthetics he had learnt from Hegel. It is the opera as such and its "awkward negativity" (p. 156) that is said to provoke this turn from the positive into the negative. It is actually the Don Juan-figure and its "coming-into-sight" that installs negativity. Isak Winkel Holm finds an example in Kierkegaard's notebooks and one from the end of the Don Juan-analysis in *Either-Or* to show that the musical coming-into-sight of Don Juan is a momentary event in an aesthetical process of production, a process that brings an immanent negativity into view. The Don Juan-figure appears and disappears; it is for a moment liberated out of that undifferentiated sound that Isak Winkel Holm likes to call "noise". In this paradoxical movement the sensory is united with morality like noise with words in music. Isak Winkel Holm calls this unity a catachresis, or a metaphorical break-down (p. 173), indicating the revolt of materiality against meaning. Finally, Isak Winkel Holm states that Kierkegaard's aesthetician in the Don Juan-analysis articulates a "poetological insight pointing towards a modern negative aesthetics as it is formulated by for instance Blanchot", a negative insight "inextricably connected to the idea of noise" (p. 182).

When I try to find my way in this brilliantly persuasive analysis by reading Kierkegaard, or rather his equally brilliant aesthetician in *Either-Or*, I find indeed that Don Juan's sudden coming-into-sight is an important ingredient in that final "image", where the aesthetician tries to find words for the overture of the opera. Before that there has also been some talk about Don Juan in terms of "hovering" and as "musical trembling" (*Zittren*). A little "mumbling" is also to be found, used to describe the sound of the strings. I cannot, however, find any "noise" (*larm*) – Isak Winkel Holm's privileged term – but there is indeed some street noise in that passage from the notebooks, that has developed into the Don Juan-reference in *Diapsalmata*. Don Juan's "hovering" existence and his sudden coming-into-sight is the decisive example in a discussion of the relation between language and music. With his usual dialectical frenzy Kierkegaard (his aesthetician) develops music as immediate and sensory while language is mediated, reflected and spiritual, therefore of higher standing and better apt for the idea. Music, on the other hand, can express sensory genius and Don Juan, the opera and the figure, is the

prime example of this sensory genius. A poetical figure like Byron's Don Juan or a dramatic figure like Molières Don Juan or an opera-figure like Tamino in *The Magic Flute* are all failures according to this analysis, the former for only using language, Tamino for combining music with ideas, something that music does not allow. Music actually does not allow even that combination of music and word that is given as sung or spoken lines in the opera: Don Juan should only sing and not use language. Nor should he have a body: one understands and enjoys the sensory genius of Don Juan all the better by closing one's eye and just listening.

Regarded as an opera analysis, the dialectics of Kierkegaard (his aesthetician) have absurd consequences, like the idea that you experience the opera best by not seeing it. Still, one must admire the energy with which he works himself through the crux that opera has always been for aesthetical analysis, due to its mixture of effects. The great predecessors of Kierkegaard, Kant and Hegel, both avoid opera (although Hegel is said to have been a secret fan of Rossini). Looking at what these authorities have to say on music, sound and words, you quickly realize that Kierkegaard is following their steps while radicalizing the argument (thereby coming close to parody) by using the opera as his example. Kant (in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, specially § 53) states that the art of music differs from language by not developing theoretical or aesthetical "ideas". Still, music offers a "language of affects" that can evoke an excitement that includes a *unnennbaren Gedankenfülle*, an overflow of thought-like material that could be reminiscent of the aesthetical "idea". Hegel also determines music in contrast to language and image. Music negates or dislocates spatiality substituting it with movement: the musical tone *erzittert*. This *schwingenden Zittern* is called the material of music.[5] (Isak Winkel Holm alludes to this important Hegel-passage on p. 18 picking up the term *Zittern*, that is as important in the dissertation as it was for Kierkegaard. But Isak Winkel Holm misunderstands Hegel: he writes that for Hegel tones are created out of material *Zittern,* while Hegel writes the opposite – that the *Zittern* of the tones is the material of music. The difference is significant: Hegel is certainly not as ignorant of material "negativity" as Isak Winkel Holm would like to have him in order to make him fit the construction where Kierkegaard by way of opera negates the affirmative Hegel). Also coming-into-sight is of course a frequent term in Hegel, prominently in the famous determination of beauty as *das sinnliche Erscheinen der Idee*. The expression is derived from the *aletheia* of the Platonic tradition, describing both truth and beauty as

coming-into-sight. Kierkegaard has his aesthetician paradoxically describe Don Juan as an "image, that permanently comes into sight" without gaining permanence.[6] And Isak Winkel Holm adds that the "event of coming-into-sight" is decisive for Kierkegaard (p. 159), thereby mixing a Platonic and a Hegelian tradition with Kierkegaard's religiously motivated epiphany and a phenomenological observation of "event" or *Ereignis*.

The important step in Isak Winkel Holm's argument is making this coming-into-sight momentary and loaded with negativity: the tones that signify Don Juan are not only transitory (as Kant and Hegel would have had it) but they are based on that *noise*, that Kierkegaard found in the street and that Isak Winkel Holm promotes to the materiality of the coming-into-sight and to the "body" not only of music but also language (p. 183).

This step, I would argue, is actually a theoretical project that derives neither from Hegel or Kierkegaard nor from Mallarmé or Blanchot (that Kierkegaard is said to foreshadow here) but that is very much Isak Winkel Holm's own: I am thinking of this fascination of *noise* and the association of *noise* with a momentary negativity. It is an interesting project but I cannot think that it has much to do with Kierkegaard. In order to find out about the Don Juan-analysis I would rather put forth a notion that is remarkably absent in Isak Winkel Holm's discussion: the *demonic*. According to Kierkegaard (the aesthetician) Don Juan is "the expression of the demonic determined as the sensory" (p. 86); Don Juan expresses a "demonic lust for life" (p. 121) that is mixed with anguish, since it faces nothingness and death. Associating music with the demonic and with anguish is actually what is new (and negative) in Kierkegaard's dialectical exercise on the relation between music and language: one cannot find such a connection in Kant or Hegel. Still, the association is not quite new: it had been done already by E.Th.A. Hoffmann in his little *Fantasiestück* "Don Juan" from 1813, where Hoffmann develops an enthusiastic analysis of this *Oper der Opern*, including the ouverture (that is provoked in images strikingly close to Kierkegaard's), at the same time that he goes on to his theory on the absolute music. The important thing here however is his associating Don Juan with death and the demonic: and this is interestingly done by way of a narrative arrangement, where Hoffmann makes his character take the step from the audience to being part of the action of the opera.

My objection to this chapter in Isak Winkel Holm's dissertation can

be summarized as a wish for Hoffmann rather than Blanchot. This means that I think that Isak Winkel Holm's own fascination with *noise* together with his fragile historical construction – where Kierkegaard by way of the opera negates an affirmative aesthetics thereby foreshadowing Mallarmé, Adorno and Blanchot – has made him neglect the most important negative components in Kierkegaard's version of Don Juan: death, anguish and the demonic. Such is the material for the real negativity of this story, making Kierkegaard's analysis into a strong text, that still (together with Hoffmann's tale) informs our understanding of Mozart's opera.

Notes

1. *Tanken i billedet. Søren Kierkegaards poetik*. I will have to quote from the dissertation as it was presented for the committee and discussed in the public defense 20/3 1998. Translations are my own.
2. "Umrisse einer Ästhetik der Negativität", in *Perspektiven der Kunstphilosophie*, hrsg Franz Koppe, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1993, p. 201. IWH quotes this on p. 88.
3. *Kritische Studien-Ausgabe* 13, Berlin: de Gruyter 1988, s. 241 (14:47). Also presented as fragment 821 in the so-called *Wille zur Macht*.
4. *Ulysse gramophone. Deux mots pour James Joyce*. Paris: Galilée 1987.
5. *Werke* 15: 134.
6. *Samlede Værker* 2, s. 88.

Strange Meaning[1]

Response to Isak Winkel Holm

Arne Grøn

In the last few decades, the relationship between philosophy and literature is once again being questioned – particularly by deconstruction, since a deconstructive reading seeks to rehabilitate the rhetorical. And there are good reasons for this, especially when the rhetorical is not simply a text's external form but also interferes with its thinking. But the real question here is whether a deconstructive reading itself actually does justice to this insight. It does play thinking and rhetoric against one another, yet when it succeeds, one must then ask: And so? For, if thinking and the rhetorical are entwined within each other, it must also be shown that there is thought at play in the rhetorical. Philosophical problems cannot be solved merely by referring to the rhetorical.

In Kierkegaard's works, philosophy and literature are mixed together, not as a theoretical project but as a concrete product. Moreover, Kierkegaard's authorship is itself determined by the relationship between thinking and rhetoric, the very thing which a deconstructive reading lays claim to. It seems, therefore, obvious to read and interpret Kierkegaard deconstructively. But the Kierkegaardian texts revolve around precisely those questions which persist even after a deconstructive meaning. The relationship between living and writing (life and text), inwardness and communication, the invisible and the visible, power and powerlessness, are indeed problems found within a philosophy of subjectivity.

Isak Winkel Holm sets his dissertation, *Tanken i billedet. Søren Kierkegaards poetik* [*Thought in Image: Søren Kierkegaard's Poetics*], in relationship to a deconstructing interpretation of Kierkegaard. His agenda goes like this: just as in a "problematizing" or a deconstructive reading, he concentrates "on the misrelation between the conceptual content and the literary devices in Kierkegaard's texts", but whereas the deconstructive reading would primarily "reveal the way in which Kierkegaard's literary

stage-setting (his "text") adroitly trips up its own serious philosophical intention, I want instead to attempt to uncover how Kierkegaard himself reflects upon the aesthetic negativity in his texts". Winkel Holm can thus describe his enterprise as something "rather more reconstructive than deconstructive" (45).

This reconstructive enterprise is, in my eyes, the main attraction to *Thought in Image*. With it, Winkel Holm fruitfully places his dissertation within the tension between deconstruction and the philosophy of subjectivity. Objections in the following article should therefore be read over against positive background. What I have said in the beginning is an argument for a reconstructive approach. A reading of the Kierkegaardian texts must return to that which has set it in motion: the fact that the texts are telling us something. When one can rightly claim that what they say is not unaffected by the way in which it is said, the opposite is also true that the last – *how* they say what they say – also has a great deal to do with the first – *what* they say.

The Concept of Negativity

As it turns out, Winkel Holm perceives negativity as a key concept in Kierkegaard, and it is a well-chosen concept. The word negativity has various meanings, all of which are central for the dissertation's reconstructive enterprise. It does not only indicate aesthetic, but also existential, negativity. In both cases, it challenges and complicates the quest for meaning. But, at the same time, this is precisely where the problem lies. My first and most essential objection to Winkel Holm is that, although he bases his reconstructive enterprise upon negativity, he does not differentiate between the different meanings of negativity. And this can be demonstrated with the aid of two of his favorite expressions: monstrosity or misconception [*misfoster*] and noise [*larm*].

If something is a monstrosity or a misconception, it is, essentially, a failure [*mislykket*]. An aesthetic misconception is for example "the bad dramatist's misrelation between saying and showing", as Winkel Holm himself writes (15). In the beginning of a later passage with the title "Typhoon", Winkel Holm remarks: "The misconceived [person or work of art] is not only an aesthetic but also an existential problem" (33). What happens here is that the misconception comes to represent negativity in the same way as the typhoon does, that is to say, as the nature of

a human being's composition. According to Winkel Holm, there is "a substantial connection between the misconceived works of aesthetics and the typhoons of existence".[2] But there is a decisive difference between being a misconception and being a composed entity. All philosophy of subjectivity in Kierkegaard rests upon that very difference: it is the difference between being a synthesis – that is to say, a created composite – and being a synthesis that does not succeed.

At the end of the dissertation Winkel Holm himself needs to differentiate between negativity as a merit and as a failure (307). Nevertheless, he claims that the composite *qua* misconception becomes and remains the model for Kierkegaard's own negative form of communication (313). But this cannot happen in virtue of its being a misconception.

For negativity in Kierkegaard has several meanings. The first is one which Winkel Holm particularly draws upon, namely the processual or unconcluded nature of existence. This meaning of negativity Winkel Holm correctly takes from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (cf. 36f). The act of existing as seen from the point of view of the existing individual is an unending task. But this is not the only kind of negativity within Kierkegaard; there is also the negativity of despair, which has itself two radically different meanings: perdition and merit. And it is precisely this difference which one should take into account if one wishes to speak of affirmation and reconciliation within Kierkegaard. At this juncture, Kierkegaard's fundamental thesis is that the affirmative can only be reached through the negative. And thus it becomes decisive which negativity we should pass through in order to reach the affirmative.

Winkel Holm makes a great deal out of noise and nonsense. Noise is meaningless (160) and inarticulate (183). Nonsense is perhaps not inarticulate, but it is meaningless. Winkel Holm now ascribes a central meaning to this meaninglessness of noise and nonsense. Thus he says in reference to *The Concept of Anxiety*, that Adam hears the words of prohibition and punishment "as if it were talk about some romantic twaddle" (296). And later on he writes that "in the garden of Paradise Haufniensis can hear *de profundis* the [human] race's musically meaningless language".[3] But is it meaningless nonsense? Let us consider the example which Haufniensis himself uses: that of a child who anticipates a world which he does not understand, and that, as he knows, he shall go into. That which the child stands across from is neither empty nor meaningless, nor is it nonsense. The child seeks to understand that which he does not yet understand. And that which he does not yet understand is not meaning-

less. It is meaning-estranged or, better yet, a *strange* meaning. It does have a meaning, but the meaning is as yet strange and enigmatic.

And thus we return once again to the difference between the various meanings of negativity. Here too negativity has to do with a process, namely that of coming to understand that which one does not understand. This disturbance of meaning which sets thought in motion is the strange meaning, and this strange meaning is not meaning-estranged in the sense of meaningless. The strange meaning is a meaning that one simply does not understand. It is not an absence of meaning; rather, it is a meaning which one seeks to understand. Even standing outside, one can identify that which one cannot understand. And that is what the child does whenever he hovers about and maybe even deals with the world of adults.

Somewhere else Winkel Holm mentions "history's collective noise of empty nonsensical voices" (204).[4] Later on he remarks that the historical context is filled with a "more" of meanings (246). But if the historical context is distinguished by having its surplus of meanings it is not meaningless.

It seems to me that Winkel Holm's view of meaningless noise and nonsense conflicts with the very point he would like to make. He shows, in a very fruitful way, that the material which thought deals with – either "the meaningless forms of the imagination" or "history's sedimented meaning" (39) – produces resistance to thought. The material is refractory. But if the material were merely meaningless or empty nonsense, then it would not even be refractory. That it is refractory is due to the material's being is full of strange meanings which themselves set thought in motion. Thus, I can now set the title of the dissertation against its author: for, whenever there is thought in an image, it is because the image itself is full of a meaning which one either overlooks or does not understand. This strange meaning is the thought which is already in the image or material.

To speak of "thought in image" could imply that the thought from within – as thought – depends upon the refractory nature of the material. But if the material contained an estranged-meaning in the sense of meaninglessness, then thought – as a stranger – would lie outside the material. It seems that Winkel Holm becomes trapped within the very schema which he would oppose, namely that we, on the one hand, have pure thought, but, on the other hand, have impure material. This schema is applied to Hegel (e.g., 92f), but Winkel Holm here overlooks that in-

wardness for Hegel implies at one and the same time a radical externality. This same schema is also applied to Kierkegaard, and, for this reason, Winkel Holm writes that Kierkegaard is "almost gnostic in his description of a human being's earthly existence as sinful and a meaning-estranged torpor" (36). But if we look to the central passages in The *Concept of Anxiety* which should strengthen this claim, then the point is almost reversed: A human being is only a person in virtue of his relationship to corporeality. It is thus the meaning-estranged torpor itself which here makes the synthesis a task. Thus, Kierkegaard can let Haufniensis say "without sexuality, no history" (*SKS* 354). And this history is the history of the task, the synthesis.

Therefore, what particularly hinders Kierkegaard in thinking gnostically is his decisive point that the obscurity which causes problems is not due so much to sensuality as to the will – namely, a human being's will to obscure himself. It is well worth noting that when Winkel Holm takes up the problem of the will, he does not use the key chapter from *The Concept of Anxiety*, chapter four, which deals with the obscurity of the will. This is no doubt connected to the surprising fact that he pays only a little attention to the concept passion found in Kierkegaard.

The Passion of Thought

In Kierkegaard, movement and passion belong together – both in existence and in thinking. With the concept of negativity, Winkel Holm, as has been said, emphasizes processuality and thus movement. And his dissertation concerns itself with the movement of thought in images.

Kierkegaard, however, links together the fact that thought is in motion with the fact that it is already in passion. At the beginning of chapter three of *Philosophical Fragments*, it says that "Each passion's highest power is always to will its own downfall" (*SKS* 243). And, as an example of this, Johannes Climacus mentions thought. That thought is in passion means that it would go beyond itself, that it wills to think that which is something other that thought itself, something which in the end thought itself cannot think. Here my question is why Winkel Holm does not make use of this Kierkegaardian definition of thought based on passion. It is crucial for him that thought be forced out beyond itself. The answer must lie in his suggestion that thought should be forced out beyond itself by the refractory nature of its material. But thought for Kierkegaard is

already understood as thought in passion. It is a movement beyond itself. Thus, thought can actually run up against the refractory material. And a further point for Kierkegaard is that thought can be fulfilled in a movement in which it becomes stalled and its own movement broken off. This emphasizes that thought is not sovereign. It does not stand entire in itself across from a strange material, but rather it is dependent upon and exists in constant reference to that which it is attempting to think.

Thesis: Poetology and Anthropology

The central thesis in Winkel Holm's dissertation links aesthetic and existential negativity together. This thesis claims "that Kierkegaard's poetological reflections concerning aesthetic negativity function as a model for his anthropological theory concerning existential negativity".[5] It is, in part, a kind of weak thesis about the analogy between poetological and anthropological reflections, and, in part, a kind of strong thesis claiming that anthropology can only become understandable if it is read from a poetological perspective.[6]

The strong thesis is not really established in the dissertation. On the contrary, one can ask: Why should the relationship between poetology and anthropology not be read backwards? Poetological reflections have as their turning point the writer's experience of non-sovereignty in the writing process, but this experience only becomes understandable through the existential experience of the loss of sovereignty. And is it not precisely this experience that the writing process deals with? According to Winkel Holm poetological negativity asks "the philosophical question about the problem of freedom" (314).[7] But is this not the same as saying that poetological negativity primarily reveals its meaning in the light of existential negativity? In this regard, it is once again worth noting that Winkel Holm takes his concept of negativity *qua* processuality or unendingness from the *Postscript* and then reads this concept back into Kierkegaard's earlier poetological reflections.

The strong thesis is expressed in a claim about *The Concept of Anxiety*, which "first opens itself up for interpretation when the anthropological problem is viewed against the backdrop of the earlier authorship's poetological thematic".[8] Later, it is correspondingly observed that "the anthropological theory of Haufniensis on the subject's historicity of original sin can only be understood in its profoundest sense if one interprets

it against the backdrop of analogy given with Kierkegaard's poetological insights".[9] And Winkel Holm then proceeds to demonstrate this by showing us the central passage on the eye and the abyss from *The Concept of Anxiety*, which begins thus: "Anxiety can be compared with dizziness. He, whose eye comes to look down into a floating depth, he becomes dizzy. But what the ground is, it is just as much his eye as the abyss; for if one had not stared down? In a similar fashion is Anxiety the dizziness of freedom, which comes about, when the spirit will set the synthesis, and freedom now looks down into its own possibility ..." (*SKS* 365).

It is striking, however, that no mention is made here by Kierkegaard of the poetological realm, but rather of the phenomenological. Here, the reference is to seeing. And the surrender of vision, its loss of sovereignty, can be experienced by each and every human being, even a human being who does not spend most of his time behind a writing desk. The play between the eye and the abyss deals with the ambiguous experience of power and powerlessness. Where does the dizziness come from – the eye or the abyss? The eye has been captured by what it sees, but what if ...what if one had never looked down? In reference to vision, one must note that it relates particularly to the ambiguous experience of freedom. That which freedom looks down into, that is freedom's own possibility. Thus, the question of subjectivity must be maintained, if one would emphasize the role of vision in the analysis of anxiety. This has to do with the fact that subjectivity for Kierkegaard already finds itself in tension between the visible and the invisible. And the question on the visible and the invisible concerns the way in which subjectivity is understood.

Kierkegaard's Authorship

The primary strength of Winkel Holm's dissertation is as an interpretation and extensive re-exploration of Kierkegaard's earlier works. By this, it is not merely *The Concept of Irony* that is meant, but also some of the early journal entries. The thesis on the relationship between poetology and anthropology here evolves into a thesis claiming that *The Concept of Anxiety* ought to be read in the light of the earlier authorship, since "Kierkegaard's original anthropological insights into the problem of freedom are worked out in the earlier authorship's poetological reflections" (315). But the question remains whether Winkel Holm could tease out such poetology, had he not read the earlier work with an analysis of the

problem of freedom as found in *The Concept of Anxiety* already in mind.

The price which Winkel Holm pays for this move is that he must ignore the authorship from 1846 onward. And it is indeed just this part of the authorship in which one finds the strongest analysis of the loss of sovereignty. For an understanding of the analyses of freedom as it is found in *The Concept of Anxiety*, it is a great deal more enlightening to interpret that analysis in light of these later works. And what is more: it is precisely here, in these post-*Postscript* works that the problem of the visible and the invisible becomes sharpened in a most challenging way. I will here only mention *Works of Love* and *Practice in Christianity* as two examples. The discourses of *Works of Love* are discourses for contemplation, and it is a contemplation or reflection that is moved by and itself moves in terms of stories and images. The world which the discourses depict is a world of vision. It is a world in which we see and are seen. Love is a reversal or transformation of this world of vision. Likewise *Practice in Christianity* is borne along by the tension between the visible and the invisible. Faith is faith in that which cannot be seen while all the while one is exhorted to *see*: to "see You [Jesus Christ] in Your true figure and in the circumstances of actuality, just as You walked about here on earth", as it says in the "Invocation" at the book's beginning. The paradox of incarnation which draws the movement of thought to a halt, and which forces thought out beyond itself, is expounded here not merely as a refractory composition of temporality and eternity, but also of the visible and the invisible.

(Translated by Stacey Ake)

Notes

1. This paper first appeared as a response to Isak Winkel Holm's Ph.D. defense, March 1998. My response relates to the original dissertation with references where possible to the revised version published as the book *Tanken i billedet. Søren Kierkegaard's poetik*, Copenhagen 1999. Unless otherwise indicated, references in the text are from this published work.
   SKS refers to *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 4, Copenhagen, 1997.
2. The formulation in the published and revised book version of the dissertation has been changed to "typhoons of existence and the misconceptions of aesthetics [are] related middle terms [*mellemvæsener*]" (36).
3. In the published book, the formulation has been changed to "the race's musical language" (304).
4. In the book, "empty" has been deleted.
5. The formulation in the published text has been changed so that the thesis is actually "about the analogy between poetological and anthropological reflection within Kierkegaard's authorship" (39). Correspondingly, the formulation in the English summary has been changed from "Kierkegaard's poetological reflections function as a matrix for his anthropological theory of existential negativity" to the fact that they "in many ways mirror his anthropological theory of existence" (320).
6. In the dissertation, it says at the end that Vigilius Haufniensis' solution for the problem of the role of angst or anxiety in the relationship between the race and the individual only first becomes "understandable given the backdrop of Kierkegaard's poetic". The formulation has been deleted from the book (cf. 315).
7. For example, Winkel Holm also says that "the poetological self-reflection found in the dissertation on irony primarily becomes of interest when it is read against the backdrop of the book's philosophical content" (121).
8. In the book, it is likewise changed to *The Concept of Anxiety* being read with the help of "the analogy to the poetological reflection in the earlier authorship" (41).
9. In the book, the weak formulation runs as follows: "that it is possible to throw an altogether different light upon Haufniensis' frequently reiterated theory of anxiety by drawing parallels to the earlier authorship's poetological reflections" (279).

Rejoinder

Isak Winkel Holm

The competent critique by Arne Melberg, Arne Grøn and Uffe Hansen (whose concluding speech is not printed here) has helped me to get a clearer view of the perspectives and problems in my dissertation. Many of their critical viewpoints have been integrated into the revised and published version of my dissertation. However, the two texts above still show more points of disagreement than can be accounted for here. On the following pages, I will have to restrict myself to only a few issues which make my theses clearer.

Arne Melberg launches a grand attack on my "enthusiastic" use of the concept of aesthetic negativity, but this attack is based, as I see it, on a fundamental distortion of my project. Melberg does not discuss my readings of Kant, Hegel, and Adorno, in which I develop my concept of aesthetic negativity, instead, he focuses on Christoph Menke, who, to some degree, has influenced my reading of Adorno. Menke is characterized as "very much a dialectical thinker in the German tradition with a tendency to situate whatever he finds in a dialectical machinery run by negativity". To do so is "dialectical imperialism".

Melberg quotes from a private letter by Jacques Derrida who seems to be playing a crucial role in his argument. In this letter, Derrida also writes that he has a "tendency to associate the negativity with Hegel and with dialectics". Thus, Derrida, and Melberg along with him, mistrust any concept of negativity, because of its ineradicable Hegelian connotations. Both fear a treacherous Aufhebung lying in wait behind the concept of aesthetic negativity.

My suggestion is that Kierkegaard's poetics can be described with a non-Hegelian and non-dialectical concept of negativity. This negativity characterizes an aesthetic process insofar it is not sublatable [English for the German Aufheben, here aufhebbar] into a higher order of meaning. Therefore, it is not a negativity that works for a machinery of meaning,

but rather one that destroys the meaningful work of art. Rather than a Hegelian negativity, it is related to the "negative construction" that Maurice Blanchot finds in Kafka's paradoxical prose.

Melberg now examines two specific problems in the dissertation caused by this "all-including" concept of negativity. First, Melberg criticizes my short overview of the history of aesthetics. It goes without saying that I am not putting forward a stylised division of the history of aesthetics in two neat parts: on the one hand, the aestheticians before Kierkegaard who were unaware of aesthetic negativity, and, on the other hand, all the later aestheticians which happily knew about it. Rather, I suggest that Kierkegaard's prominent precursors in aesthetic theory, Kant and Hegel first of all, privilege the beautiful with its harmonical reconciliation between spirit and matter, and thus giving only a secondary role to unbeautiful aesthetic negativitiy (as I use the term). In contrast, a number of important aestheticians from the 20th century (but of course not all of them) tend to highlight the disharmony between aesthetic meaning and aesthetic materiality. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche offers a compelling description of some of these negative features of art under the name of the Dionysiac. That the later Nietzsche says something else is irrelevant here.

Secondly, Melberg directs his critique towards my readings of Kierkegaard's various textual images of Don Juan's "coming-into-sight", of which I have been discussing only the wave image above. Melberg correctly sums up the result of these readings by writing that Don Juan's "sinnliche Erscheinung", his coming-into-sight, is "loaded with negativity". However, Melberg does not get my argument right. He underlines my "fascination of *noise*" and adds that this fascination is really just projected upon Kierkegaard's text.

Kierkegaard repeats the image of Don Juan's coming-into-sight several times, and indeed only some of these images features noise. In any case, the noise is not the important thing here, it is just a displaceable – if still fascinating – figure. My concept of negativity is not a concept of substance, but a concept of process. What interests me, then, is not the foam or the noise or alternative figures of the recalcitrant materiality, but rather the logic of movement which traps Don Juan "constantly" – *"bestandig"* – in his unfinished coming-into-sight. I surely cannot take the credit for this idea of a negative and unfinished aesthetic *Erscheinung*, since it is very explicitly put by Kierkegaard's Aesthetician himself in the wave image: Don Juan is "a picture that is continually coming into view

but does not attain form and consistency, an individual who is continually being formed *but is never finished*". Melberg is not fascinated, but rather deafened by the figure of noise, and this makes him miss the important part of the argument: the unfinished processuality of Don Juan's aesthetic coming-into-sight.

Arne Grøn, too, discusses the figures of noise and nonsense in connection with the concept of negativity. Grøn duly stresses the important difference between two kinds of noise: on the one hand meaningless inarticulate sounds, on the other hand meaningful language which, from a certain perspective, *appears* as meaningless nonsense. In the first case, we are dealing with a materiality foreign to meaning, in the second case with foreign meaning. This difference is crucial to the second thesis of my dissertation. According to Kierkegaard's poetics, the recalcitrant aesthetic material that turns the aesthetic production into a disharmonic process is a blend of meaningless sensual form and sedimented historical meaning. Put more epigrammatically, it is a mixture of the light foliation of the Kantian arabesque and the heavy rubble of the Hegelian symbol.

This mixture of meaningless noise and meaning also plays a role in Haufniensis' strange theory of Adam's prelapsarian language. In Paradise, Haufniensis writes, the innocent Adam walks around using words like good and evil which he is in no position to understand. In spite of Adam's ignorance, a word like evil is, of course, embedded with sedimented historical meaning. The innocent child is not evil, but people living before him have certainly been so. Prelapsarian language makes sense, but from Adam's innocent perspective this sense appears as nonsense. Therefore, Adam's language is a mixture of meaningless materiality and meaning. This Adamic babble of meaningful words plays an important role in Haufniensis' theory of the fall. According to Haufniensis, it is precisely this kind of language that supplies the connection between the single individual and the sinful history of the race. Historicity is mediated in a babble of meaningful words.

This complex notion of nonsense is crucial to my reading of *The Concept of Anxiety*, but Grøn is justified in claiming that, in the dissertation, I tend to describe nonsense undialectically as meaningless. I have corrected my confusing formulations in the published version of my work.

Another point in Grøn's critique concerns the third thesis of my work concerning the relationship between Kierkegaard's poetological insights and his anthropological theory. Grøn asks about the nature of this relationship. In the dissertation, I describe this relationship in two differ-

ent ways. On the one hand, I conceive of it as a *genealogical* relationship, suggesting that Kierkegaard's poetological theory, as the priviledged term, functions as a kind of matrix for Kierkegaard's anthropological theory. This is what Grøn calls the strong thesis. But on the other hand, I also put forward a more modest thesis of an *analogical* relationship between the two distant fields, suggesting that there is a reciprocal interchange between aesthetics and the existential philosophy. This is what Grøn calls the attenuated thesis.

I agree with Grøn that only the second of these two theses is defensible. The important thing is the interchange between two normally seperate theoretical fields, aesthetics and existential philosophy. By highlighting this relationship I want to stress that "the aesthetic" in Kierkegaard's work is not only an ironic play of *écriture* deconstructing and dismantling philosophical meaning, but also plays an important role in its philosophical content.

It is crucial, however, that the relation between Kierkegaard's anthropological and poetological insights really is understood as analogical. Grøn mistakes my intention when he comments upon my reading of Haufniensis' famous description of anxiety as a dizziness caused by the eye. As an argument against my reading, Grøn advances that Haufniensis actually discusses phenomenology, not poetics. To this extent, we agree. My thesis is not that Haufniensis, or for that case Kierkegaard, really talks about poetics when pretending to give a phenomenological description of anxiety. *The Concept of Anxiety* is not a literary theory in disguise. My point is, rather, that one can find a strikingly clear *structural* analogy between Haufniensis' discussion of his anthropological problems and Kierkegaard's poetological insights. And that this analogy makes what I call Kierkegaard's poetics relevant for a reading of *The Concept of Anxiety* and for Kierkegaard's existential philosophy as a whole.