

A View of Julien Sorel, the Protagonist of “The Red and the Black” with Reference to Søren Kierkegaard’s “The Concept of Irony”

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Irony has always been a rather elusive philosophical concept and thus to a certain extent ignored by philosophy. Kierkegaard’s treatment of this subject in his thesis *The Concept of Irony* is an attempt to define the term and place it within the framework of world history. By doing so he tries to establish the point at which irony first made its appearance in history with Socrates. Both Hegel and Kierkegaard agree that the Socratic standpoint was essentially a negative one, but Hegel according to Kierkegaard confused Socratic irony with that of Plato and misunderstood the Socratic method which was not ‘to cause the abstract to become visible’, but the other way around: namely, to cause the concrete actuality to become abstract.

Kierkegaard claims that the favorite Socratic negative principle “I know nothing” was used by him in a totally negative way – not in order to start a discussion and arrive at something – but rather as an end in itself. We see this in the favorite Socratic procedure of asking questions. According to Kierkegaard the purpose of asking questions may be twofold,

“One may ask a question for the purpose of obtaining an answer containing the desired content, so that the more one questions, the deeper and more meaningful becomes the answer; or one may ask a question, not in the interest of obtaining an answer, but to suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining. The first method naturally presupposes a content, the second an emptiness; The first is the speculative the second the ironic. Now it was the latter method which was especially practiced by Socrates.”¹

Furthermore, Socrates, by making virtue a product of knowledge and vice of lack of knowledge, dispensed with custom and passion.

He wanted to substitute the concrete ethic of old Hellenism with a subjective moral code, which meant that now anybody should be free in terms of obeying the laws of the state as such only if he found them reasonable. It is easy to see how the Greek state must have felt threatened by Socrates since he never arrived at "an idea of the state" with its quite specific privileges destined for the survival of both the state and the individual. By freeing each individual from his customary obligations vis-a-vis the state, he took away the concrete relationship between the citizen and the state and substituted for it a vague subjective determinism. It is clear then that Socrates freed the individual but in a negative way, he offered nothing concrete in the place of a concrete ethic. "The subject is thus negatively free" says Kierkegaard. He also maintained that Socrates, by implicitly threatening the state and by refusing to defend himself, became a sacrifice to the historical process but was later vindicated by history with the decline of Hellenism. His death however was not tragic but ironic seen from the standpoint of Socrates since death presented itself to him as a totally unknown quantity and therefore could neither be feared nor desired. His punishment was absurd because it was no punishment at all seen from his point of view.

I hope to show that Julien Sorel, the protagonist of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is a fictional creation, equivalent to the historical character of Socrates and used in the same way as he was, as a historical sacrifice to the irony implicit in the world historical process. As a consequence I will try to clarify and elaborate what Kierkegaard means by irony, and how he visualizes the process of history.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between two different species of irony. One of these directs itself towards this or that particular subject the other is directed towards the whole of existence. It is the latter that I am interested in, since it comes close to the standpoint of Julien Sorel, who is at war with society as a whole – both his own class and those above him – and uses irony in order to overcome particular obstacles. One might even say that Julien's relationship to the world is ironic from the very beginning when he copes with his brutal father by turning himself into a miniature *Tartufe*, in order to avoid his father's blows. In his role as *Tartufe* however, he has been deprived of great models, at least in the beginning. Later on when he becomes aware of the different structures within society both in Verriere and in Paris, his irony assumes a much more mordant and sophisticated character.

Kierkegaard holds that "either the ironist identifies himself with the nuisance

he wishes to attack, or he enters into a relation of opposition to it, but in such a way, of course, that he is always conscious that the appearance is the opposite of what he himself subscribes to, and that he experiences a satisfaction in this disparity.”²

It is the latter kind Julien employs when dealing with the prude Madame de Fervaques. But in this instance what distinguishes him from a professional ironist is the fact that he does not take much pleasure in his role, even though it is well-played as the following quotation shows, as well as useful in terms of getting Mathilde de la Mole back.

“Quelquefois elle se flattait de mépriser ce jeune homme si triste; mais malgré elle, sa conversation la captivait. Ce qui l’étonnait surtout, c’était sa fausseté parfaite; il ne disait pas un mot à la maréchale qui ne fût un mensonge, ou du moins undéguisement abominable de sa façon de penser, que Mathilde connaissait si parfaitement sur presque tout les sujets.

Ce machiavélisme la frappait. Quelle profondeur! se disait-elle; quelle différence avec les nigauds emphatiques ou les fripons communs, tels que M. Tanbeau, qui tiennent le même langage!”³

We have here dramatic irony in all its enticing charm, shared by Julien and Mathilde, directed against Madame de Fervaques.

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard feel that irony is a negative concept. Hegel, according to Kierkegaard, when he writes about irony is mostly affected by that kind of irony closest to him in history – post-Fichtian irony which he rightly loathes but which prevents him from seeing the whole concept. When Kierkegaard writes that in irony the subject is negatively free the following quotation will suggest what he means by being positively or negatively bound by speech.

“When next I consider the speaking subject, I again have a determination in all forms of irony, namely, the subject is negatively free. If I am conscious when I speak that what I say is my meaning, and that what is said is an adequate expression for my meaning, and I assume that the person with whom I am speaking comprehends perfectly the meaning in what is said, then I am bound by what is said, that is, I am here positively free. Here applies the ancient line: *semel emissum volat irrevocabile verbum*. Furthermore, I am bound in relation to myself and cannot detach myself whenever I choose. If, on the other hand, what is said is not my meaning, or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself.”⁴

In irony the essence and the phenomenon seem as if they are not identical. If on the other hand, the ironist supposes that the listener understands him then the phenomenon and the essence are identical, but indirectly.

The ironist (I here include Julien) is continually conscious of the gap between the ideal and actuality and by using irony lifts himself above reality into the realm of the absolute. Julien is already at eighteen conscious of the idea of a more just and ideal state, which he has been able to deduce from Rousseau's *Confessions*, and from the old military doctor, who makes Julien yearn for the Napoleonic era, in which merit was placed above inherited privileges. It is important to understand that the ironist usually despises and as far as possible withdraws from it into the realm of the absolute, where he sees everything as possibility and nothing mundane is allowed to drag him down.

"But the outstanding feature of irony in these and similar instances is the subjective freedom which at every moment has within its power the possibility of a beginning and is not generated from previous conditions. There is something seductive about every beginning because the subject is still free, and this is the satisfaction the ironist longs for. At such moments actuality loses its validity for him; he is free and above it."⁵

Similarly we see Julien's irritation when his friend Fouque offers him an advantageous partnership in his business. Here Julien is suddenly dragged from his Napoleonic heights into a situation which presents a choice. "Pour Julien offre de Fouque lui avait en effet enlevé tout bonheur: il ne pouvait s'arrêter à aucun parti."⁶

If I am maintaining that Julien as a fictional character becomes a sacrifice to the irony of world history, in the same way as Socrates as a historic figure it is necessary to understand how Kierkegaard imagines the evolution of history and the part irony plays in it.

If the ironist, as Kierkegaard claims, in a certain way anticipates the future by negating the present and responding to it ironically, then I think it is necessary to understand that the ironist chooses to build his castles in Spain either in a more ideal past or, as Kierkegaard maintains, in the future. In terms of Julien it is only natural that he should be attracted to the more opportunistic, more glorious and slightly more democratic society of Napoleon and view the present actuality as an unwelcome interruption of historic progress which can only be restored by a new revolution. And Julien would play an active role in that revolution since military action clearly holds a fascination for him. His

remark to the failed revolutionary Altamira shows that he is certainly made of revolutionary material. The question discussed is whether one is justified in a revolution to kill a few people in order to save the rest. Julien replies, "Ma foi! dit Julien, qui veut la fin veut les moyens; si, au lieu d'être un atome, j'avais quelque pouvoir, je ferais pendre trois hommes pour sauver la vie à quatre. Ses yeux exprimaient le feu de la conscience et le mépris des vains jugements des hommes..."⁷ It should also be noted that one of the things that attracts Mathilde to Julien is the fact that he is the only one among her friends who incarnates a new revolution, as a possibility. "Is he going to become another Danton?"⁸ is a question which is present in Mathilde's mind.

The basis for Kierkegaard's view of world historical irony is Hegel's concept from *Geschichte der Philosophie* (XVIII, 62): 'All dialectic accepts as valid, what shall become valid as if it were valid, and allows the internal destruction to develop within it. Such is the universal irony of the world.' Each particular historical actuality is then seen as a moment in the actualization of the Idea, it bears within it the seeds of its own dissolution. In order to illustrate this one might use the example of Socrates again, who employed irony in order to destroy old Hellenism and help the new assert itself. Kierkegaard uses the example of John the Baptist, who himself was not "the one to come" and did not understand that which was to come, yet he destroyed Judaism through itself by demanding that it should give that which it professed to give, namely righteousness. When Judaism was unable to give that which was demanded of it, it perished and John indirectly made room for the advent of Christ. The same happened with the arrival of the Reformation, when Catholicism had lost its validity for many people, who wanted to replace it with a truer actuality. Although Kierkegaard is basically in agreement with Hegel as to the dialectic aspect of world history and the role irony plays in it, he draws an analogy between the negative in Hegel's system and irony in historical actuality.

It seems to me that the role of the ironist as seen by Kierkegaard is close to that of a midwife, who helps the new to come forth, without exactly realizing the nature of this new. Kierkegaard here makes a distinction between the role of a prophet and that of the ironist. For the prophetic individual actuality has also lost its validity when he is lost in prophetic visions, but his relation to actuality is usually not problematic since he seemingly goes hand in hand with his time, in such a way that actuality is not aware of any opposition.

Next Kierkegaard mentions the authentic tragic hero and here is where

Julien belongs, one for whom the given actuality has completely lost its validity. He does not possess the new but knows that the present does not correspond to the idea. He is different from the prophet by virtue of the fact that he has opened a front against actuality. And that front is irony. According to Kierkegaard an ironist does not have to proceed ironically. But Julien does proceed ironically; even his relations with Madame de Rênal are tinged with irony after he discovers her contempt and displeasure when confronted with his enthusiasm for Napoleon.

In the end, when he is condemned Julien refuses to proceed ironically and this is precisely why society destroys him. But before he reaches that point he is almost totally estranged from society, "La position morale où il avait été toute sa vie se renouvelait chez M. le maire de Verrière. Là comme à la scierie de son père, il méprisait profondément les gens avec qui il vivait, et en était haï . . ." De la vie, il n'avait parlé avec sincérité qu'au vieux chirurgien-major; . . .⁹

Kierkegaard maintains that, "The ironist is also a sacrifice required by the world process, not strictly speaking as if he needed to fall as a sacrifice, but zeal in the service of the world spirit consumes him."¹⁰ This is also true of Julien, who chooses to become a sacrifice as opposed to other possibilities – to bribe the warden and escape, a spectacular conversion – or follow one of Mathilde's schemes. By addressing the following words to the judges, Julien quite knowingly commits suicide,

"Messieurs les jurés,

"L'horreur de mépris que je croyais pouvoir braver au moment de la mort, me fait prendre la parole. Messieurs, je n'ai point l'honneur d'appartenir à votre classe, vous voyez en moi un paysan qui s'est revolté contre la bassesse de la fortune.

Je ne vous demande aucune grâce . . .

Voilà mon crime, Messieurs, et il sera puni avec d'autant plus de sévérité, que, dans le fait, je ne suis point jugé par mes pairs. Je ne vois point sur les bancs des jurés quelque paysan enrichi, mais uniquement des bourgeois indignés . . ."¹¹

We see here that Julien no longer proceeds ironically vis-a-vis society. But there is still the author's irony. By creating a situation in which dramatic irony suddenly becomes visible by virtue of the fact that although Julien tells the judges nothing but the truth he nevertheless does not express the whole truth; namely his profound hatred of the people condemning him. That hatred he

shares only with the reader. Socrates on the other hand who shares Julien's contempt for his judges continues to proceed ironically before the Athenian court and thus almost teases them into condemning him to death. Kierkegaard has mentioned that one might deduce Socrates' view of his judges from different statements made in the *Gorgias*, of which the following will suffice.

'And what I said to Polus can easily be applied to me, for I shall be judged as a physician would be judged who was summoned before a court of little boys on a charge brought by a cook' (521E).¹²

Kierkegaard holds that the *Apology* which describes Socrates' "defence" is clearly ironic since Socrates does not defend himself at all and uses the occasion to get the best of his accusers. The suggestion that he should be maintained at prytaneum or be fined as a punishment is of course ironic. Although he proceeds ironically in front of his judges, his view of death as such is not ironic. Kierkegaard says that when Socrates claims he knows nothing, he is deadly serious. But death for Socrates does not contain a threat since he is only curious about the transition from one state to another. Furthermore he would be equally satisfied with the cessation of consciousness as well as a life in Hades in which he would continue to converse with wise men in order to expose the ones who are not truly wise. As an ironist he would be perfectly satisfied with nothingness. Thus the death of Socrates could not be called tragic, but is an absurd sacrifice.

For the tragic hero, however, death is something like a giant obstacle, which he has to come to terms with and which ultimately requires all his ingenuity and strength because he knows it is a suffering. His death therefore becomes a sacrifice to history.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted by Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London, 1965). Tr. Lee M. Capel, p. 73.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- 3 Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, 1964), p. 413.
- 4 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London, 1965). Tr. Lee M. Capel, p. 265.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 270.
- 6 Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, 1964), p. 105.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 303.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 10 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London, 1965). Tr. Lee M. Capel, p. 278.
- 11 Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, 1964), p. 476.
- 12 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London, 1965). Tr. Lee M. Capel, p. 122.