

*Adorno's Thought-Image of Kierkegaard*Clifford Lee

The presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea. Adorno

If philosophy is to avoid a reductive dismissal of the non-quantifiable, it must take up a dialectical approach wherein its form is determined, not pre-determined, by the material into which it inquires. The writings of Søren Kierkegaard formed such a determinate object of inquiry for the young Adorno and were most formative for the shaping of his own project of critical inquiry. It is, in large part, from Kierkegaard that Adorno came to understand that the truth-content of philosophical thought is never fully severable from its presentational, aesthetic form. In his recent work, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writer's Reflections from Damaged Life*, Gerhard Richter contends that it is this insight into the aesthetic dimensionality of truth that is the unifying principle holding together the diversity of approaches and positions characteristic of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School. Richter States: “*what* they say cannot be thought in isolation from *how* they say it ... any philosophical truth-content their writing may contain invariably is tied to, and mediated by, its specific and potentially unstable figures of presentation.”¹ As “conceptual engagements with the aesthetic” that are equally “aesthetic engagements with the conceptual,” the writings of such thinkers pose unique challenges to their readers by involving them in the construction of *Denkbilder*, thought-images. While it is the

¹ Gerhard Richter, *Thought-images: Frankfurt School Writer's Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Richter's book discusses Benjamin, Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno.

epigrammatic style employed by Benjamin in his *One Way Street* that may best exemplify *Denkbilder*, understood as “brief, aphoristic prose text[s]... that both illuminates and explodes the conventional distinctions among literature, philosophy, journalistic intervention and cultural critique,” Richter’s deployment of the term is multi-dimensional.² We must understand it as “the formal site for singular and unpredictable—but not arbitrary or facile—acts of conceptual creation.”³ Adorno’s early work, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, can be construed as an attempt to construct a thought-image of Kierkegaard. Moreover, Adorno’s study reveals Kierkegaard himself to be a writer of the *Denkbild*. The following analysis offers three passages from Kierkegaard’s writing as examples of the type of writing Richter describes as thought-images. These aesthetic constructions are shown to be suggestive of the tense relation Kierkegaard’s thought bears to the idealism it seeks to escape; and are shown to serve as illustrations of how this relation plays itself out in the work his writing requires of its reader. If we wish to gain an understanding of Adorno’s project that acknowledges the challenge placed upon his readers by the irreducibility of its aesthetic component, a study of Kierkegaard’s influence on the writers of the thought-image might be necessary.

In a distinctive appropriation of Benjamin’s allocation to philosophy the task of the representational presentation of ideals, rather than the conceptual deduction of the quantitatively real, Adorno’s study of Kierkegaard aims to give expression to the non-conceptual aesthetic force at work in his writings. His reading of Kierkegaard is productive, not dismissive; its formal coherency is more mosaic than syllogistic. The particular points of its mosaic structure are made up of passages of Kierkegaard’s writings that are transferred whole and intact into

² Richter, 7.

³ Richter, 18.

Adorno's book in such a way that they are scarcely differentiated from Adorno's own words. These points are themselves thought-images of Kierkegaard's composition. Adorno weaves these images in a manner such that they reveal Kierkegaard's notion of inwardness to be the point at which his existential thought slips into the very a-historical idealism it set out to undermine. While Kierkegaardian interiority is the subject of critique, out of this analysis emerges the notion's truth-content. In its showing of its failure to fully liberate itself from the realm of semblance, from the historical realm of appearances, it reveals itself to be a thought inseparable from the imagery with which it presents itself, to be, that is, irreducibly aesthetic. Adorno identifies the following passage, taken from the aesthetically-oriented, pseudonymous writings of the first half of *Either/Or*, as "a definition of the aesthetic, itself pictorial and certainly the most precise that Kierkegaard gave:"

Sorrow is my feudal castle. It is built like an eagle's nest upon the peak of a mountain lost in the clouds. No one can take it by storm. From this abode I dart down into the world of reality to seize my prey; but I do not remain down there, I bear my quarry aloft to my stronghold. My booty is images that I weave into the tapestries of my palace. There I live like one of the dead. I immerse everything I have experienced in a baptism of forgetfulness, consecrating it to an eternal remembrance. Everything temporal and contingent is cast-off and forgotten. Then I sit, an old man, grey-haired and thoughtful, and explain picture after picture in a voice as soft as a whisper; and at my side a child sits and listens, although he long knows everything I have to say.⁴

This passage successfully conjures an otherworldly form of ideality, as thought-image, as it turns its own imagery in upon itself. The last few lines seal the enigmatic by twisting the romantic imagery of the knight's

⁴ Kierkegaard as quoted by Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 64-65.

palace of aesthetic seduction unexpectedly into that of elderly man and child, perhaps father and son, in an imaginary form of contemplation before the images the poetic knight, as the father, has produced. The material inscription of the aesthetic ideal in the representational figuration of the image, has, as the content of its expression, the resistance it offers to the father's attempt at its explanation. Reflective knowledge of the image is tied irrevocably to the abstractions of language, to the annihilation of the particular in its being named within a classificatory structure of abstract, conceptual identification. While a lifetime of dwelling within the edifice of comprehensibility that is language may lead to there being a lot to be said about each image, the old man here is aware that within the child's pre-reflective grasp of each image there is contained a knowledge that encompasses, perhaps even surpasses, that of his own. This echoes the perplexing declaration of the seducer from *Either/Or* that, insofar as he has "any educative influence" on the girl he seduces, it is only "by teaching her again and again what ... [he] has learned from her."⁵

Johannes, the pseudonymous author of the "Diary of a Seducer," often reflects on the interior spaces within which his planned seductions unfold. Adorno states that the following description may be the "key" of Kierkegaard's entire body of work:⁶

The living room is small, comfortable, little more than a cabinet. Although I have now seen it from many different view-points, the one dearest to me is the view from the sofa. She sits there by my side; in front of us stands a round tea table, over which is draped a rich tablecloth. On the table stands a lamp shaped like a flower, which shoots up vigorously to bear its crown, over which a delicately cut paper shade hangs down so lightly that it is never still. The form of the lamp reminds

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 327.

⁶ Adorno, 42.

one of oriental lands, the movement of the shade of the mild oriental breezes. The floor is concealed by a carpet woven from a certain kind of osier, which immediately betrays its foreign origin. For the moment I let the lamp become the keynote of my landscape. I am sitting there with her outstretched on the ground, under this wonderful flower. At other times I let the osier rug evoke ideas about a ship, about an officer's cabin – we sail out into the middle of the great ocean ... Cordelia's environment must have no foreground, but only the infinite boldness of far horizons.⁷

Johannes, as an erotologist, is well versed in the power of semblance and knows how to arrange the particulars of a setting such that the resulting image/mood serves his furtive purposes of enchantment.⁸ Here, that image is one of a romantic ideality entirely unbound to the finite conditions of its occurrence. However, the empty space of interiority he intends to construct, his flight into an object-less interiority, never moves away from its point of departure, those material objects of its foreground that subjectivity would like to view as “mere occasions” for the reflective activity of an independent subject, if not, the creations of an imaginary mode of this subject's reflection.⁹ In this way, Kierkegaardian inwardness conceives of itself as an “objectless interior vis-à-vis space.”¹⁰ The boundaries of his interiority are established as a withdrawal from the spatiality of objects that experiences itself to be the bestowal of the objects' meaning.¹¹ If the external world is subordinated to the fantastical whims of an internal subject, this interior space, nonetheless, maintains a dialectical relation to that which it excludes.

⁷ Adorno, 43.

⁸ Benjamin describes Kierkegaard's aesthetic philosophy as an “erotology” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland & K. Mclaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 335.

⁹ Adorno, 29.

¹⁰ Adorno, 43.

¹¹ This perhaps is another way of saying that the world of objects exists as equipment for the subject and therewith obscuring the possibility that the subject, to some extent, arises from the needs of the material objects of its socio-historical context.

Adorno writes: “In Kierkegaard’s ‘situation,’ historical actuality appears as reflection. Indeed it appears re-flected, literally thrown-back ... [and] ... the harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself... the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediately, in subjectivity.”¹² The objects filling Cordelia’s living room receive their meaning not from their actual substance, “...but out of the *intérieur*, which assembles the illusion of the things as a still-life. Here, the forfeited objects are conjured up in an image [by which] the self is overtaken in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence.”¹³ In short, Kierkegaard, in his refusal of the world, uncritically accepts the world of cultural objects as nature: “objects which appear historically are arranged to appear as unchanging nature.”¹⁴

Thus, on the one hand, Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the isolated interiority of subjective experience represents the apex of modern idealism; in the face of a society laying siege to the individuation of experience, the idealist drive in Kierkegaard’s thought takes flight into itself. In attempting to free itself from the materiality of its origins, that is, from the historical and social conditions of its own possibility, Adorno shows us how Kierkegaardian subjectivity, inadvertently, yet inevitably, drags the world into its supposedly empty castle of imaginary resignation. The castle is revealed to be a mere house of cards. On the other hand, as a failed attempt of thought to think itself out of its own conditions, it puts on display the inability of thinking to provide an adequate account of itself as the particular “individuation of knowledge” it experiences itself to be.¹⁵ To the extent that they succeed in this failure, Kierkegaard’s writings can be said to convey an indeterminate force analogous to Adorno’s notion of the non-identical. It is an

¹² Adorno, 40.

¹³ Adorno, 81.

¹⁴ Adorno, 81.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 47.

attempted escape from the entrapments of idealism that is, at one and the same time, an expression of idealism in its most abstract form. However, this is only one side of the complex portrait of Kierkegaard sketched in Adorno's study. Taken in this profile, the founding-father of existentialism is expressive of the idealism his thought is famous for vehemently opposing. At one and the same time, however, Adorno's stated contention is that although Kierkegaard's "'I' is thrown back on itself by the superior power of otherness," he is "not a philosopher of identity ... he does not recognize any positive being that transcends consciousness."¹⁶ Within Richter's formulation of thought-image, he states that "because there can be no theoretical concept that is free from the (unreliable) singularity of the particular shape that it necessarily assumes upon entering language... the Denkbild, self-consciously exposes the inescapable contamination of the theoretical by the figurative;" by enacting the tension between the particular and the universal, "rather than glossing over [it]... in an effort to create the false semblance of disembodied meaning."¹⁷ The claim that Kierkegaard is not a thinker of identity is justified only insofar as his writing expresses an unresolved tension between the universal and the particular, between the abstract, historical operations of language and the concrete awareness of the individuated, linguistic, and thus historical, subject within whom these operations become known. Conceived as a multi-dimensional construction of thought-images, Kierkegaard's thought is effectively an attempt to achieve this feat of expression. His insistence on the direct incommunicability of existential inwardness and the consequent self-imposed requirement made upon his writing that it take an indirect, literary form, make of his work a performance of the inescapable figurative dimension of theoretical philosophy. Thus, the anti-idealistic

¹⁷ Richter, 25.

elements of Kierkegaard's work are found within the destabilizing force of its aesthetic operations.

Particular demands are made upon the reader by a style of writing that undermines the proclivity of thought to attribute to it a singular meaning. Richter categorizes these requirements to be "response[s]... of singularity, to the ways in which it makes claims on us that cannot be verified by any metaphysical structure or universal certainty."¹⁸ This requirement of singularity made upon the reader is a challenge to think his or her own particularity within the general structures of language. Take the following thought-image from *Either/Or*:

My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush.¹⁹

Here, Kierkegaard's pseudonym expresses the indifference of language in relation to that which it names. If the meaning of life could be expressed with a word, it would have to be one that could mean any thing at all; anything, perhaps, except nothing, as it will be categorically named as something or the other with any word chosen. Kierkegaard's writing here is emblematic of Richter's formulation of a *Denkbild* according to which a thought-image seeks to transmit not a conceptual content but an active struggling with its own state as language. For Adorno, "...mournfully compar[ing] the idea of a fissured, fragmentary individual to that of an enigmatical disparate text," this passage "gets to the heart of the matter" behind Kierkegaard's statement that "the earthly

¹⁸ Richter, 37

¹⁹ Kierkegaard as quoted by Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 139.

and temporal as such are exactly what fall apart in the particular.”²⁰ If the concretion of the subject eludes the concept, and this is, at least in part, what Kierkegaard is pointing to with the theme of an “incommunicable... existential reality” of the individual, the evasion transpires as an enactment of the unresolved tension between the particular and universal found in any intentional expression of reflexive self-awareness.²¹ The images Kierkegaard constructs effectuate an encounter with the limits of representational thought, and it is within this aesthetic encounter that Adorno locates a negative dialectical counterforce to the reconciliatory dialectic of subjective idealism.

Kierkegaard’s writing contacts its reader in the way the artwork, for Adorno, conveys itself through a contact with an indeterminacy that the viewer, the reader, the listener, determines in his or her act of viewing, reading or listening.²² The enigmatic quality of Kierkegaard’s thought-images shares with the work of art “the duality of being determinate and indeterminate... question marks... [whose] answer is both hidden and demanded by the structure.”²³ The writers of thought-images strive to “produce a form of writing that would allow the theoretical content of their work to be performed—rather than merely described by the logical and formal categories of philosophy.”²⁴ According to Shierry Nicholsen, it is his insistence that the aesthetic form of his work be inseparable from any consideration of its philosophical substance that poses the greatest to our understanding of Adorno. An appropriative comprehension of Adorno that would acknowledge the link between the negative dialectical structure of his thought and the critical aesthetic force of its aesthetic presentation must take a closer look at “an undervalued and

²⁰ Adorno, 139.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. Swenson & W. Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 320-321.

²² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124.

²³ Adorno, 124.

²⁴ Richter, 16.

underexamined aspect of Adorno's work: the role of the subject and subjective experience."²⁵ To think the subject without reification, without granting transcendental meaning to a purified immediacy of experience, and without making the negative surreptitiously the positive, ontological structure of being, to think along with Adorno, is a daunting task. Richter's formulation of the *Denkbild* as a critical form of writing that engages the subjective, interpretative experience of its reader offers one strategic means of approaching this task. It offers a concrete opening to a fruitful consideration of the aesthetic and pedagogical aspects of Adorno's work. Moreover, as this brief analysis demonstrates, a closer examination of Kierkegaard's influential role on the development of the aesthetic dimension of critical theory is warranted and promises to be an illuminative avenue for re-evaluating the contributions of the Frankfurt School.

²⁵ Shierry Weber Nichol森, *Exact Imagination, Late Work On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 6.