

**Clouds: The Tyranny of Irony over Philosophy**

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*Both Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche maintained an abiding concern for Socrates throughout their productive lives. Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on irony through a Socratic lens and Nietzsche once declared that try as he might, he could not completely separate his concerns from those he associated with the Greek. Kierkegaard famously favored Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in his comedy Clouds, claiming that it accurately portrayed the illegibility of the ironist. Nietzsche leaned toward Xenophon's Socratic writings but most famously blamed Plato's Socrates for the demise of tragic culture. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche engaged with the variety of Socratic depictions throughout their careers and perhaps more importantly, both employed irony in a Socratic fashion inflected by textual concerns. In other words, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche understood irony as both the indication of an epistemological limit, and as a strategy to induce the reader to think herself into the text. My article "Clouds: The Tyranny of Irony over Philosophy" analyzes this common concern and its implications for our understanding of European modernity.*

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**Introduction: The Mask of Dionysus**

In 423 B.C.E. the first production of Aristophanes' *Clouds* won third place at the *Dionysia*. As was his custom, Aristophanes took aim at his contemporaries in Athens, and his depiction of Socrates could easily be considered unflattering; he depicted the philosopher as an incomprehensible and trivial windbag lacking a modicum of either ethical comportment or common sense. At the performance, Socrates, who was still alive, is reputed to have stood up showing himself to the crowd as if to say, yes that is me on stage, the illegible one. Søren Kierkegaard, who in many ways played the role of Copenhagen's own irascible gadfly, harbored a deep affection for both Socrates and Aristophanes' portrait of the man. He felt that an ironist such as Socrates could not be possibly understood by age towards which he turns, faces, and questions.<sup>1</sup>

Another admirer of Socrates, Friedrich Nietzsche preferred Xenophon's portrait of Socrates above all others. While many commentators including Kierkegaard criticize Xenophon for having shortchanged the philosophical implications of Socrates' life and thought, and some would claim that there is an absence of irony in these depictions, one only has to recall one moment in the *Memorabilia* to understand the great ironist Nietzsche's attraction to the text. At the end of *The Banquet*, Xenophon's version of a *Symposium* attended by Socrates, the philosopher and several of the other guests observe a performance. A young man and woman are playing the parts of Dionysus and Ariadne on Naxos. Something curious happens: "when Dionysus arose and gave his hand to Ariadne to rise also, there was presented the impersonation of lovers kissing and caressing each other" (Xenophon, *Banquet*: 635). There is nothing strange in that; actors acting the part though an *impersonation* are hardly breaking convention. However, Xenophon records the spectator's reactions thus:

The onlookers viewed a Dionysus truly handsome, an Ariadne truly fair, not presenting a burlesque but offering genuine kisses with their lips; and all were raised to a high pitch of enthusiasm as they looked on. For they all overheard Dionysus asking her if she loved him, and heard her vowing that she did, so earnestly that not only Dionysus but all the bystanders as well would have taken their oaths in confirmation that the youth and the maid surely felt a mutual affection. For theirs was the appearance not of actors who had been taught their poses but of persons now permitted to satisfy their long cherished desires. (*Banquet* 635)

According to Xenophon's description, the performers inhabited their roles in a manner that they merged with *the someone else* they portrayed. The onlookers, Socrates included, viewed a performance that convinced even the performers, who were able to inhabit their roles and make the desires of those portrayed their own. Socrates and his friends understood the mask of Dionysus to be his true face and the performance took an ironic turn where the audience could not discern enactment from existence, and perhaps as I have already

suggested neither could the actors. It was as if Xenophon understood *avant la lettre* the Nietzschean premise that *everything profound wears a mask, which grows around every profound thinker or thought due to false interpretation.*<sup>2</sup>

The salient point is that this performance blurs the line between role-playing and existence and opens up the possibilities of understanding someone else's affect and of extending this understanding through a mimetic reaction. There is an irony to this aesthetic performance and its reception; the actors and the audience tacitly agree to allow the actor to become the mask and the mask in turn informs both the actors and spectators sense of their own desires, and their comportment towards them. Xenophon's depiction of this scene and how it affected the banqueters reminds us of this phenomenon. He writes: "those who were unwedded swore they would take themselves wives, and those who were already married mounted horse and rode off to their wives that they might enjoy them" (*Banquet*: 635).

Though there is no Nietzschean commentary about this scene, either published or in the notebooks, one could imagine that this was a moment where his affection for Xenophon's Socrates peaked. For it is here that a performative irony blurs the lines between the mask and the God, a moment where the highest thought can be confused with the human being who portrays it, forgetting himself all the while; his subjectivity an affect of this oscillation between the self and the role being played. Subjectivity from this perspective has an ironic component; we play roles that are other to us, and we are observed as merging with those roles, yet that merger allows for others to experience our affect in a human sense, as something possible for ourselves in our particularity. Irony tells us there is only so much we can know about the other, but his illegibility alerts us to his commonality to us.

These two examples exemplify one of lessons that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have to convey; irony brings epistemological limits into a process of representation, highlighting the multiplicity of interpretative possibility as it challenges stable and conventional meaning. They teach that irony is the trope of becoming in that it never allows the idea to rest; it does not allow thought to find

repose, to nestle safely in the truth of being. Irony separates by virtue of being discrepant by nature; it can be deployed to bring us to an interpretative act that creates a crack in the boundary between self and other, and as such provides us with an approach to understanding the possibility of an ethics. Irony can be used to empty out the fictive fullness of bourgeois subjectivity, with its collective notion of individuality, and in doing so, leaves a trace, enabling us to engage with difference, and most importantly, irony leaves the room for the other to engage with us. Irony's pathos emerges in the collision of expectations and interpretations, and as such, it is also the means by which we can see the past not as a necessity but as a possibility, a point emerging from contested perspectives. Irony is the wheel upon which the various spokes of differentiated repetition turn. And as such, irony can be employed in the service of a decolonial process, especially when the past has been coopted by a colonial power, and the future of an interrupted culture depends on a recognition of a lived practice denigrated by the superimposition of European modernity as an interpretative yardstick.

It follows that from my own perspective, that the tyranny of irony over philosophy installs a regime of epistemological modesty, which acts as a gesture to the other, an invitation to existentially engage, to speak, to fill in the space of irony's negativity. In other words, irony enables us to avoid mistaking the voice of the other for Echo as we open up the history of the self and of the other dynamically through an acknowledgement of the limits of our knowledge. It is also important to remember that there is a danger to all this, as Kierkegaard tells us, we should regard irony as we would a seducer.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps these thoughts are not unique in themselves. However, the crux of this essay boils down to this: for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Socrates represents a moment of crisis, a turning point in Classical Greek culture. They understand the Socratic moment to be one of destruction and inauguration both, the end of one way of thinking and the onset of another. They both believed that the Socratic moment was one in which the notion of the good emerges in all too abstract a fashion, that as conceived, it resided too far from human experience.

Perhaps most importantly, they understood their own moment in history to also be a moment of crisis and saw the reduction of the multiplicity of Socrateases to a singularity to be emblematic of this crisis.<sup>4</sup>

That said, it is important to note that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both were under the sway of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German fascination with Greek culture as a seminal moment, they lived in an intellectual climate that contributed to the enshrinement of the notion that classical Greece inaugurated a way of thinking that was integral to the world in which they lived. Many 19<sup>th</sup> century European intellectuals understood the classical legacy to be a uniquely constituent aspect of their own progress and particularities. In the tradition of thought that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche engaged with, Greece was designated as the seed that grew into modernity, and modernity in this tradition is Christian Europe. Consequently when Kierkegaard and Nietzsche came to regard their own historical moment as a time of crisis, as a nihilistic age where the human being as such was overly abstracted, they turned to Socrates in order to understand the trajectory of the movement towards nihilism, and as they considered him to be someone who helped usher in this break in western history, they believed understanding him was part of the solution.

However, when they faced Socrates, they trained their eyes on a multiplicity, an indiscernible negativity, a silent figure whose thought was available only as conveyed by others. So they addressed Socrates in Socratic fashion, ironically, for that was the only way to engage with an origin that was irretrievable, a moment whose contested legacy seemed to reveal the form of a crisis they felt they were re-experiencing in their own times. In other words, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche conducted their critique of modernity from the standpoint of modernity, by ironically engaging with the ancients, by reanimating the idea of history, consequently showing the fair hair of progress to have dark roots. If this premise is acceptable, this exploration is more than an intellectual historical fancy; something rather telling emerges. For within this Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean interrogation of European modernity, the primacy of a thinking that claims a progression from a central origin, from Classical Civilization and

thought, is a scaffolding, that is both erected and dismantled by an engagement with irony.

In other words, I believe that irony affords us a means of resistance to dominant discourses that level the multiplicity of perspectives in order to claim a progression from a clear point of origination. The crux of my concern resides in my belief in the value of looking at Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's critique of modernity from the perspective of modernity in a broader fashion. I believe their use of irony produces a form, a modality of thought that helps us to think about an ethics in a globalized, transnational world. Kierkegaard's placement of irony on the border between the aesthetic and the ethical allows us to see how the temporal discontinuity, which he claims is the hallmark of the aesthetic, allows for a conception of multiple modernities to emerge and collide with dominant notions of historical progression.<sup>5</sup> His understanding of the renewal of the task of recognizing absolute otherness for each generation, alerts us to the corporeal reality that each moment in the life of the human being is constituted by an ironic relationship to the past, one in which the contours of what will be bump up against an origination that returns and is changed through returning, a past in the state of becoming. This allows the particularity of the body in time and in space to take precedence as it negotiates between the multiplicity of narratives that converge in conscious reflection, with praxis.

Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence enjoys a family relationship to this notion of Kierkegaardian repetition.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Nietzsche alerts us to how dominant interpretations are an affect of power, how they can enervate bodies, and how the body and misinterpretations of the body are expressions that can ironically resist these the claims of these dominant interpretations, rendering them retrospective fictions, points of internal negotiation. This becomes even more interesting when a philosopher like Nietzsche, who is famous for claiming in a book that moves towards tracing a genealogy of morality that naming is the lordly right of taking possession, is read with thinkers such as the Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who reminds us that naming a Kenyan lake after Queen Victoria plants European memory on African soil.<sup>7</sup> Irony is the way to break up

any notion of origination that would be associated with the contingency of power and naming, and as such allows the multiplicity of human historical perspectives to begin again, to emerge again. Irony when seen from a distance considers the importance of namer and named both, irony sees naming as a performative act.

My overall premise is that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche can help us think these thoughts through; as both thinkers were concerned with the presence of radical otherness,<sup>8</sup> with a multiplicity that conveys the thought that a clear origination, an essential comportment is impossible. This is a frame through which an ethics whose normativity bathes in nihilistic institutions and relations of dominance can be critiqued. Furthermore, the critique of a thinking that claims modernity as a singular trajectory comes into play. I believe that is why Socratic irony became interesting for both of these thinkers for they understood that the multiplicity of perspectives that emerged after his death informs us about the centrality of interpretation in the conception of a culture. In other words, the death of Socrates, a primal scene in the history of Western thought becomes a moment where perspectives emerge and compete for primacy, where the present becomes a moment that contests the past, for the sake of posterity. Lastly, as stated, my reading of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is informed by a larger project, a work that addresses the effects of globalization as a leveling process, a process that began during the colonial era with colonial education, and whose effects are compounded by the way that market's intrusion into the world of ideas and people obscures the needs of particular bodies in particular spaces, and obstructs our vision of the other through the predominance of object relations, reified relations. With the stakes explained (I hope), I begin.

### **Part One: The Faintest Trace of Subjectivity (Irony is the trope of becoming)**

Perhaps we only need a trace, the faintest trace of subjectivity to sense the possibility of an ethics. Perhaps we have been too hasty, often mistaking this trace for nothing more than an echo, a narcissistic danger that confronts us at the

moment when we sense the possibility of otherness. Perhaps the origin of the voice of the other, this voice that sometimes seems to repeat what we have always already heard said, what we have said ourselves, is not Echo and only resembles her because the contours of her body cannot be discerned, and thereby theory renders her unseen corpus indiscernible. Perhaps this limit of theory, of vision, is the sole reason that voice, the trace of the other, seems so familiar. Perhaps this is why Socrates still attracts, and seduces, for while we might think he tells us something that we have heard before, he has in reality never told us anything. Others wearing his mask have only told us about him, created his reputation from their own interpretations. However, it is important to remember that Plato's Socrates reminds us, even as he tells his accusers:

I have gained this reputation, gentleman, from nothing more or less than a kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom do I mean? Human wisdom, I suppose. It seems that I am really wise in this limited sense. (Plato. *Apology*, 20d)<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps like Plato's Socrates, we can learn that we do not know what counts for wisdom in an absolute sense, that our wisdom traces a boundary, points to a pathway, and in no way provides us with a map. And perhaps like Kierkegaard and like Nietzsche, we can learn that there is no absolute origination for an ethics, just a borderline, a moment when the dimension of our body unfolds in the possibility of sensing, of discerning the desire of the other, of hearing the story of the other, of honoring the presence of the otherness beyond our ken. Perhaps then we can establish a perspective dialogically, acknowledging that moment where what we know recedes, leaving just the faintest trace for the other to sense. It can perhaps be said, that this is the moment when in our blindness we run our fingers across the contours of the face of the other, (across another's face).

This describes the possibility of an ironic ethics conceived as a beginning without origin, always open to the new, always unknowing of the other, always knowing that one does not know, that one is wise "in this limited sense." Perhaps our particularity cannot be described by bourgeois notions of the individual, of the



subject. Perhaps our bodies voiced and extended in poiesis, and our selves returning in praxis create the movement describing the nodal point for an ethics, the faintest trace of subjectivity.

### **The Concept of Irony: Socrates as that faint trace, Socrates as an epistemological limit**

If one looks past his juvenilia, omitting his review of HC Andersen's novels, it can be claimed that Kierkegaard frames his authorship around a parenthesis bracketing two figures, Socrates and Christ. I will amplify the significance of this pairing in a moment after first briefly addressing the place the Socrates enjoys in Kierkegaard's authorship. If one wishes to be playful, and parody Nietzsche, the great parodist himself, one can take recourse to Aphorism 190 from *Beyond Good and Evil*, where after accusing Socrates of unduly influencing his most famous student, Nietzsche mentions that Plato through the power of his own interpretation had varied the image of his master "to the point of infinity and impossibility, into all his masks and multitudes." The aphorism concludes with a phrase written in Greek that when translated reads: "if one regards Socrates, one sees Plato in the front, Plato in the back, and a chimera in the middle" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*: 80). Perhaps if one wishes to understand Kierkegaard's relationship to Socrates, one must parody the parodist and claim that one sees Kierkegaard in front, Kierkegaard in the back and a chimera in the middle. That chimera is like all such fictional creatures, a hybrid, a whole consisting of differences, an interpretation of infinity and impossibility that assumes masks and multitudes; in other words a figure of possibility residing in the multiplicity generated by the limits of knowledge. Perhaps this would be a productive way to frame what Kierkegaard called his aesthetic authorship, through an understanding of how his engagement with Socratic irony as an epistemological limit, engenders the masks and multiplicity of his pseudonymous writings.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps one can make the case that Christ should be attached to the upbuilding

discourses in a similar fashion, but this is both beyond my ken and the scope of this inquiry.

In any case, and as most of you already know, Kierkegaard wrote a dissertation entitled the *Concept of Irony*, and this text's subtitle tells us that the concept was delineated with continual reference to Socrates. He emerges out of what he called "the long parenthesis" of his student years after a consideration of Socratic irony. The dissertation itself begins with a series of fifteen theses written in Latin, the first of which addresses Socrates and Christ. I will return to the significance of this thesis in a moment. Suffice to say for now that Kierkegaard opened the parenthesis of his academic thralldom by unleashing the chimera, Socrates, from between a prison with half circular walls. However, he closes the circle once again as he concludes. For at the tail end of his philosophical activity, in an article written during a time, which conveyed the intimations of his own mortality in a way that he could scarcely ignore, Kierkegaard wrote an article for his broadsheet, *The Moment*, entitled "My Task," where he obliquely returned to the beginning of his enterprise, by speaking to the continuity of his thought. He wrote that "the only analogy I have before me is Socrates, my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that others are that even less" (Kierkegaard: *The Moment and Late Writings*: "My Task" 341). These two texts, *The Concept of Irony* and "My Task" act in a sense as yet another pair of parentheses around Kierkegaard's thought, and allow a glimpse of why one would forward the postulation that Kierkegaard crowns irony tyrant over philosophy.

For Kierkegaard, if Socrates embodied that limited kind of human wisdom; he was also the embodiment of irony, who left only that faintest, most ephemeral trace, and as such conveyed "the lightest and weakest indication of subjectivity"<sup>11</sup> (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*: 6). For Kierkegaard Socrates taught only through the negative, from the possibilities that irony affords. Remembering that Kierkegaard famously described Socrates' dialog with Protagoras in the following manner: "They stand face to face like two bald men, who, after a long drawn out quarrel, finally found a comb," (CI: 55) perhaps it is within bounds to claim that

this constitutes Kierkegaard's understanding of the gesture that his own texts needed to make; that of one bald man arguing over a comb with an invisible interlocutor, a gesture of indirect communication through an ironic figuration that anticipates a reader to come, a reader who like the bald man seeking the comb must realize the difference between an ideality and existence. This is the key element or perhaps a result of his fascination with the figure of Socrates, as a human teacher<sup>12</sup> and as a nexus of possibilities emerging from a series of questions. For that is what the Socratic ironist does, he turns and faces his moment with a question.

As a result Kierkegaard's reading of Socrates defied any sense of certainty, any sense of an answer. He could not place him, could not allow him to rest in one place. He refused the Socrates of Plato, the Socrates, who according to his adoring student, confronted Parmenides and Zeno's notion of stasis and unity by positing the ideal form as a solution to the problem of multiplicity and change, thereby creating an abstraction, an empty resting place for the movement of eros. This is a Socrates that Kierkegaard considered to be obscured by what he called "tragic ideality." Instead, Kierkegaard drew a Socrates standing on two borders: when depicted as the epitome of irony, he stands on the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical, which is really the liminal position between the sensations of one body and the relation of many bodies, embodying the seductive reflection that draws one away from oneself; and when depicted as the epitome of the comic, Socrates, in all his contradictions, can be found standing on the border between the ethical and the religious, which is the boundary between the relationship of many bodies as they appear to be continuous in time and space, and the relationship between the particularity of one body as it attempts to form a relationship with that which is absolutely other, incommensurate to human experience, and outside of time and finitude.

**Part 2: Perhaps it is only the faintest trace that elicits a sense of the past as possibility, and anticipates a future where particularities can emerge.**

If the parenthetical pairing of Christ and Socrates articulates the frame of the perspective that Kierkegaard conveys, if he understands his task as being Socratic and not Christian, the opposition he creates is not a matter of one figure being exclusive of the other, it is a matter of collision. To see this one only has to return to the first thesis of *The Concept of Irony*, which reads: “The similarity between Christ and Socrates consists essentially in their dissimilarity” (CI: 6). Here Christ as incarnation, as the weakening of divinity through the assumption of human form (Kenosis) is said to be both like and unlike Socrates, of whom we later learn emptied the human form through his abstraction, by means of his irony.<sup>13</sup> The opposition creates a picture of what Kierkegaard construes as the antinomy of consciousness; Christ, whose presence on the earth embodies the weakening of divinity, and Socrates, who through irony, weakens the divine through the limits of his human knowledge, giving us only the colorless, odorless, faceless, forms, the abstraction of the idea in the face of absolute otherness together stand in for the relationship between the eternal and the temporal. With this pairing we have an illustration of the movement to and fro of consciousness, the subjectivity of the trace.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, with Christ, you have the movement from the absolute to the embodied particular, from eternity to the temporal; while with Socrates you have the opposite movement, from the particularity of embodiment to the abstraction of the absolute, from the temporal to the imagining of the eternally enduring. Christ and Socrates are similar and dissimilar in that they delineate different moments in the arc of a movement, from the eternal to the temporal embodied, and from the temporal embodied to the eternal abstractly, from the absolute to the particular in temporal fullness, and from the particular to the absolute in radical contingency. Both movements elide or skirt over the territory of the ethical and both figures are sacrificed by their age as a result. The pairing of these figures suggests that their similarity is their tragedy, and their dissimilarity emerges when we consider the nature of their comedy,

Christ is the sight of a paradox, a comic collision between the eternal and the temporal, he reconciles through his return absolutely particular at the end of time, bringing the low on high through a species of judgment that is unconditioned, and Socrates' comedy, well that is another story that we will soon tell. But first there is one more point to make.

### **That possibility is multiple**

"The Ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it...the ironist is also the sacrifice the world demands, not as if the ironist always needed in the strictest sense to fall as a sacrifice, but his fervor in the service of world spirit consumes him" (CI: 261). And in this manner, Christ, like Socrates, faced his age, and felt the sting of being untimely, of turning towards and being against his moment. However, there is a difference between the untimeliness of the two figures that Kierkegaard will later develop in *Philosophical Fragments*: Christ is for Kierkegaard, the epitome of the historical, emerging from possibility to actuality, the divine made flesh. However, for Kierkegaard, Socrates remains ahistorical remaining a possibility, an origin effaced, an effect of the vacuum of authority in the beginning of an epoch, always a possibility, always in potential a manner of philosophizing and creating values. Christ is unknowable because he embodies the paradox, the absurd, his comedy is his return, Socrates is unknowable because he never wrote a word that we retained and he was thereby unreadable; his comedy is that he was finite, but still cannot be read: "For the observer, Socrates' life is like a magnificent pause in the course of history: we do not hear him at all; a profound stillness prevails—until it is broken by the noisy attempts of the many and the different schools of followers to trace there origins in the hidden and cryptic source" (CI: 191). Socrates' comedy emerges in the noisy collisions engendered by his illegibility. He is the singularity that produces multiplicity.

While Christ's death and the externality of his life are described by the perspectives forwarded in the synoptic gospels, to know him for Kierkegaard, is

tantamount to having faith in his historical facticity, his incarnation as the possible made actual. Socrates' multiplicity is of a different nature, it is not a matter for faith but consists the emerging of other voices in the face of his silence. This is the crux of how Kierkegaard's reading of Socrates differs from Hegel's, who famously assigned the birth of self-consciousness to Socrates, whom he saw as an origin. For if Hegel ignored the multiplicity of sources that describe the Socrateases that have been left to us as a trace, Kierkegaard engaged with three major figures who depicted Socrates. Of these, he found Xenophon too banal, and Plato too idealizing. Kierkegaard favored, as most of you know, Aristophanes' Socrates, favoring the comic ideal over the tragic. He saw the initial moment of self-consciousness as a collision that could only be expressed comically and ironically, in an existential gesture delivered in the negative.

### **Part 3. Clouds: the tyranny of irony**

Therefore, even though we lack direct evidence about Socrates, even though we lack an altogether reliable view of him, we do have in recompense all the various nuances of misunderstanding, and in my opinion that is our best asset with a personality such as Socrates. (CI: 128)

As mentioned, Socrates' comedy is that he is the singularity that produces multiplicity—he is a site of interpretative collision. Kierkegaard takes his solace in the various nuances of misunderstanding, his explication of irony performs ironically, and so it is not surprising that of all the misapprehensions of Socrates, Kierkegaard thought that Aristophanes misunderstood him in the best way possible. So if Socrates is misunderstood in a great variety of ways, and comedy for Kierkegaard involves contradictions colliding, then perhaps the best way to understand Kierkegaard's Socrates is to engage with the depiction that allows us the most sustained and controlled comic irony. *Clouds* fills that bill.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the play, I will quickly relate the story, then point out what Kierkegaard finds significant, and conclude this section by speaking to his points. The play opens up with Strepsiades, the twisting one,

and his son, Phiddipedes, arising from a night's sleep. Strepsiades is a "simple farmer" from a demos outside the city walls who married a woman from a more urbane and established family. Their son, influenced by his mother's family,<sup>15</sup> is a lover of horses, and his passion for them has landed his father into great debt. Strepsiades tries to convince Phiddipedes to study under Socrates, who is depicted running a school called the "Thinkery." Strepsiades wants his son to learn "the worse" as opposed to the "best argument" so that he can talk his way out of his debts. Socrates, offers instruction in both methods. Phiddipedes cannot be bothered and refuses to attend, so Strepsiades goes in his stead. He gains entry and when he meets Socrates, the latter is suspended in the air in a basket, a position, which he assumes for the sake of making "accurate discoveries about meteorological phenomena. I had to suspend my mind to comingle my rarefied thought with its kindred air" (Aristophanes, *Clouds*: 39). Socrates then proceeds to teach Strepsiades the inanities of his rarefied thought, and in great pedantic detail. The simple man is a bit too slow on the uptake and Socrates' patience begins to wear as thin as the rarified air that he breathes. However, more importantly, Socrates introduces Strepsiades to some new deities, the clouds. He denies the existence of Zeus and calls the clouds "the only true goddesses," while exclaiming that "all the rest are rubbish" (*Clouds*: 59). He adds a demand that Strepsiades

will believe in no god but those we believe in: this Void, and the  
Clouds, and the Tongue...( *Clouds*: 71)

I am not sure if a better description of irony has ever been conceived, a dialectic of the absolute potential, the empty space of the void, opposed to the bodily materiality of the tongue (the flesh of the word), which synthesizes into shapes, which dissipate and change depending on atmospheric conditions.

However, despite his newfound understanding of the cosmos, Strepsiades proves too simple to learn and he returns home, only to convince a still reluctant Phiddipedes to attend to matters at the "thinkery." Socrates turns the boy over to the better and worse argument so that he can learn for himself from the source. The two types of argument then engage in a polemic that eventually degenerates

into an ad hominem attack on the audience. The “best” argument has all the virtues of tradition and the “worse,” well, all the faults of ungrounded innovation. The “best” argument argues on the grounds of these virtues and the “worse” turns every argument into a play on bodily functions. Eventually the worse argument prevails when it points out the rather large posteriors that pervade the audience and the best argument leaves the field. Socrates then passes off the teaching of Phiddipedes to the worse argument and the boy enters the ‘thinkery.’ After a few days, Phiddipedes emerges from the “thinkery,’ paler than a sheet and armed to the teeth with worse arguments. He teaches his father a thing or two and Strepsiades, now equipped with weapons of mass deception, uses the techniques learned by his son to chase away his debtors with a fusillade of non sequitor. However, all does not end well. Phiddipedes, no longer believing in anything at all save for the power of the “worse argument,” beats his father, convinces him that the beating is justified, and even threatens to beat his mother. His embrace of the “worse argument” allows him to invert the family structure. In reaction, Strepsiades blames the clouds for having led him astray and their leader responds: “No, you’ve only yourself to blame, since you took the twisted path that leads to evil doing” (*Clouds*: 203). When Strepsiades wants to know why they led him on, the chorus leader replies: “ We do the same thing every time to anyone we catch lusting for shady dealings: we plunge him into calamity until he learns respect for the gods” (*Clouds*: 205). Strepsiades then reaffirms his loyalty to Zeus, climbs onto the roof of Socrates’ “Thinkery” and burns it to the ground.

I will not take you through a history of the reception of the play. Suffice it to say that Plato’s Socrates famously and obliquely remarks upon it during his apology, and Plato was reputed to sleep with a copy of Aristophanes under his pillow. Many commentators speak to it as a defense of tradition in the face of innovation, though it becomes apparent to me that the clouds shift depending on the moment and Strepsiades’ conversion back to traditional beliefs seem to be yet another twisting expediency by someone who is wont to perform such contortions.



Kierkegaard's reception of the play is significant for our purposes.

As I mentioned previously, Kierkegaard rejects Xenophon's representation of Socrates as being too banal, too close to the earth, and Plato's because it is too ideal in a tragic sense, too abstracted in contemplation of the divine. Interestingly enough, he treats these two later depictions of Socrates before he discusses Aristophanes' contemporaneous portrait suggesting that he is more interested in a dialectical understanding than a historical reconstruction. Perhaps we can even posit a dialectic, where the thesis of Xenophon's tongue has its antithesis in Plato's void, and the synthesis of the two is the Socrates of the cloud, a Socrates who hovers between that which is quotidian and that which is pure abstract possibility in the form of the ideal, reflecting the folly of both positions through his pedantic negativity. More importantly, however, Aristophanes' Socrates, like the clouds, reflects the desires of those who behold him.

In any case, Kierkegaard's comments on the play are quite interesting. He sees parody as the comic ideal, and here that makes great sense as he reads Aristophanes' play as a site where the manifold descriptions of a Socrates whose voice is effaced by history are read against other variations. Furthermore Kierkegaard claims that "the essence of comedy" is "viewing actuality ideally, in bringing the actual personality on stage" (CI: 129), and while this is certainly reminiscent of Nietzsche's criticism of Euripides who he claims stands in for Socrates, aiding and abetting his master's destruction of tragic culture, Kierkegaard is concerned with something different here, namely a dialectic of ironic possibility. He finds his ideal metaphor in Socrates' new deities, the clouds, which Kierkegaard describes as the "aeroform reflection of his hollow interior" (CI 133), and the "infinite possibility of becoming anything that is supposed to be yet unable to make anything remain established" (CI: 134). This depiction is an indication of how Kierkegaard viewed the parallel aspects of the crisis of Socrates' moment and his own. He writes about the clouds: "But just as their emptiness is manifested in themselves, so it is manifested in the community, the state which they nourish and protect..." (CI: 134).

In other words, the comic ideal of the clouds is nihilistic, as they reflect the emptiness of the institutions in their midst, and reflect what Kierkegaard calls the “impotence of the observer who sees them only in the shape of his own desires, who in wanting the objective obtains only his own likeness.” According to Kierkegaard, the tyranny of the clouds and the tyranny under which the clouds suffer manifests in that they “merely catch the likeness of the subject but only reproduce it as long as they see it” (CI: 135). This critique is almost identical to Johannes, the reflective seducer’s discourse about the limitations of the mirror and it is easy to see here, that the irony of clouds reveals that comedy is a gesture, designed to prompt a repetition of the image in praxis, in thought that returns, to be taken up again in reflection, *gjentaget*, or repeated at the border between the self and the other. As Kierkegaard tells us, one must warn against irony as against a seducer. Nihilism is the danger of irony in the romantic sense of being infinite and absolute.

Kierkegaard goes on to argue that Socrates’ facetious attitude towards the clouds allows him to take distance from their shape changing, but “what he keeps is formlessless as such” (CI: 136), in other words, he is absolute becoming, pure possibility, but he avoids the mistake that Kierkegaard regarded the German romantics to have made; namely he does not enshrine irony as a principle, but sees it only as a form of representation. Lastly Kierkegaard equates Socrates’ hovering with the clouds hovering indicating his intermediary position as an ironist, on the border between the self and other, on the border between the quotidian of the ethical and the divine.

#### **Part 4: Availing oneself of the tyranny of irony to free oneself from the tyranny of irony**

If it is assumed, therefore, that Socrates’s whole activity was ironizing, it is also apparent that in wanting to interpret him in the comic vein, Aristophanes proceeded quite correctly, for as soon as irony is related to a conclusion, it manifests itself as comic, even

though in another sense, it frees the individual from the comic. (CI: 145)

You might ask after reading this, how can irony conclude and thereby both establish the comic and free from the comic. How can it move in and out of the realm of collision, of the borderlands between beings in social relationships and absolute otherness? I would posit that it is only by means of irony that one can be freed from its tyranny, its negativity, its multiplicity without ground.<sup>16</sup> In response to this danger, and with a move similar to Nietzsche's understanding of active nihilism, Kierkegaard establishes the principle of controlled irony as his dissertation concludes. He begins this section by addressing irony as a form of poetics. He rejects the excesses of romantic irony for the same reason as Hegel, positing that its infinite striving leads to an abyss of absolute and infinite negativity. He argues that Shakespeare, however, was able to master his irony, in order to relate himself ironically to what he writes, thereby he was able "to let the objective dominate" (CI: 324). This is the very reason that Aristophanes was able to depict a Socrates that was true to his appearance, multiple and indiscernible for his contemporaries, hovering somewhere in between the heavens and the earth. This type of totalized irony in the poetic act makes "the poet and the poem free." According to Kierkegaard this occurs because controlled irony does not infinitely regress, but instead is made finite, sitting on the boundary of the poetic and the actual, on the border of the projection of the self through making, and this making being in turn, the extension of the self in the anticipation of interaction with others.

To be controlled in this way, to be halted in the wild infinity into which it rushes ravenously, by no means indicates that irony should lose its meaning or be totally discarded. On the contrary, when the individual is properly situated—and this he is through the curtailment of irony—only then does irony have its proper meaning, its true validity. In our age, there has been much talk about the importance of doubt for science and scholarship, but what doubt is for science, irony is for personal life. ...As soon as irony is

controlled, it makes a movement opposite to that in which uncontrolled irony declares its life. Irony, limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency. Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it, but loved by those who do. (CI: 326)

Here we can discern the movement that allows the tyranny of irony to free us from irony. The act of mastered ironic poiesis allows the poet to move outside the poem, to produce an objectivity that bears the trace of her mastery. However, there is a double movement to controlled irony, as the employment of irony allows a praxis, the first trace of a personal life to emerge in actuality, in an actuality, which “acquires its validity through action” (CI:329). This action, as has been pointed out, is a form of movement; namely, the extension of the human being through poiesis and the movement back to the self via the intensive activity of praxis, a movement to and fro, that indicates the faintest trace of subjectivity, the beginning of a personal life that is tied to actuality, one that listens for otherness, one in which as Victor Eremita reminds us, the inner is not the outer, and hearing is the sense most necessary.<sup>17</sup> “The ironist,” Kierkegaard tells us “is a prophesy about or an abbreviation of a complete personality” (CI: 149). And I would claim that a complete personality, the trace is ironically opened up towards the possibility of otherness through anticipation.

**Part 5: A Nietzschean coda: We knowers do not know ourselves:  
irony as ethos**

I must confess that Socrates is so close to me that I am almost always fighting a battle with him. (Notebook 6(3) 1875)

Thus wrote Friedrich Nietzsche in the early summer of 1875, and we can see from this remark, that Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard understood Socrates to be a point of reference that could not be avoided. He considered the Socratic moment to announce the onset of nihilism and if his published criticism of Socrates’

thoughts, influence, and appearance will span his entire career, his unpublished work is much more ambivalent. But these are thoughts for another essay.

In any case, Nietzsche was very much aware of the multiplicity of Socratic sources, though unlike Kierkegaard, he favored Xenophon's account, calling his *Memorabilia*, the most valuable book in antiquity, one that "wounds and gives pleasure" (Notebook 18 (47) 1876). Though he never explicitly refers to this, and as I mention in the introduction to this essay, I can imagine a young Nietzsche reading Xenophon's version of the *Symposium* (Banquet), reaching the end and beholding the scene with Socrates: that of two young actors playing the part of Dionysus and Ariadne on Naxos. Xenophon describes how neither Socrates nor his companions can discern whether they are acting or not, and I can only imagine Nietzsche being drawn to the blurring of the line between self and other, between masks, the erasure of the border between role played and affect experienced, and knowing that Xenophon's version of Socrates understood the Dionysian.

However, the issue is the relationship of Socrates to the ironic and the ironic to the ethical, and while the Dionysian draws and intoxicates, it is Nietzsche's Socrates who often stands in opposition to this god who returns. That is the exoteric expression of Nietzsche's position. What I would like to suggest as I close, is that this position is the mask for Nietzsche's movement towards the tyranny of Socratic irony, and his subsequent movement away from it by virtue of an irony that resembles Kierkegaardian irony, an irony that makes an existential gesture to the dear reader, or in Nietzsche's case, to all and no one. This is how the Nietzschean critique of morality approaches an ethics, its possibility is construed at the limit of intersubjectivity—where the other is anticipated but not yet present.

"We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers," (Nietzsche: *On a Genealogy of Morals*: 3) the German illustrates the point even better, "Wir sind uns unbekannt, wir Erkenenden, wir selbst, uns selbst..." (KSA 5:247) the play of the subject and object pronoun, the sentence brilliantly separating each; first by the verb to be, and then by the self. And so Nietzsche opens his movement towards

a genealogy of morals, by pluralizing the emblematic, ironic, Socratic dictum: I know that I do not know. For in matters of morality, the faintest trace of the plural, emerges only by virtue of an ironic understanding that the particularity of an embodied body politic cannot be known unless we view it as a possibility whose representation has heretofore been governed by power relations, we cannot know it in and of itself through the way it represents itself. Subsequently, Nietzsche seems to be saying as he opens his genealogy: any attempt at understanding the origin of an inclusive ethos, the relationship between a we and an us, needs to be governed by Socratic ignorance, a questioning without expectation of an answer that might reveal more than a limited wisdom. For if Nietzsche's genealogies can be boiled down to a process, this process receives a concise expression in aphorism # 34 in the *Gay Science*, *Historia Abscondita*,<sup>18</sup> where we are told that perhaps the past is still to be discovered, and this discovery is contingent upon the temporal irony that the past too is in a state of becoming, for the repetition of history in the consciousness of the individual is governed by an ironic relationship to the past, one where its representation is often a misrecognition of the fact of the body. Perhaps like the "I," the "we" is also a prejudice of grammar.

### **Repetition: Opening up to otherness; Incipit Nietzsche**

The best expression of this temporal irony, an irony when the past is anticipated, is Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return of the same. Nietzsche's first public announcement of the eternal return comes in aphorism 340, the penultimate section in the 1881 edition of the *Gay Science*. In this aphorism, which begins, with the word "Wie" and ends with the choice between two alternatives, the reader is asked how she would respond when asked to experience her entire life again. In this aphorism, perhaps the central moment in Nietzsche's philosophy is posited in the form of a question, and this question is placed in a sense in parenthesis, enclosed between 2 other aphorisms: Namely, #339, *The dying Socrates*, which describes the last moments before the death of Socrates and #

341 Zarathustra's *Untergang*. In 339, Nietzsche criticizes Plato's Socrates for sacrificing a cock to Asclepius, thanking him for curing of the disease of life, and in # 341, entitled, *Incipit Tragoedia*, we have almost the exact text which opens up Nietzsche's next book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The dying Socrates' exoteric meaning is conveyed by Nietzsche's criticism of what he calls Socrates' resentment, and his statement that we need to overcome even the Greeks. However, a more esoteric reading emerges when we remember that this is Plato's Socrates, and that he had given his reasons for not fleeing in the *Crito*, stating that "If it is what the Gods want so be it" (Plato, *The Crito*: 43b), that his priority was not merely to live, "but to live well," (*Crito*: 48b) and that he had refused to escape because he did not want to defy his fate. Plato's Socrates had also expressed that "to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise" (Plato: *The Apology* 29a) and he expressed that he had hoped to continue to seek wisdom in the world beyond (*The Phaedo*), an anticipation he felt comfortable expressing because who knew the ways of the gods and what happens beyond the border of life. In other words, Socrates kept true to his limited wisdom, and he accepted his fate, and when he drinks from his cup of poison, he enters into the realm of pure possibility by affirming it, *Amor Fati*. And this is precisely, what Zarathustra, the teacher of the return will be confronted with in Nietzsche's next book, the affirmation of the return of his experience, including that which disgusted him.

The other side of this parenthesis drawn around the announcement of the eternal return, the aphorism that announces Zarathustra's *Untergang*, that announces, *Incipit Tragoedia*, finds a Zarathustra, "sick of his wisdom," who must go down to human beings and "give away and distribute until the wise among the humans enjoy their folly and the poor once again their riches." (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: 195) He ends by telling the sun that his wisdom's "cup wants to become empty again," (cup of poison, cup of honey) and Zarathustra, the teacher of the eternal return, anticipates going down to the world of the human body politic to invert relations and empty himself. It is also important to remember both that *The Gay Science* opens with an aphorism that asks when the time for

laughter, for comedy will come, and that in the 1886 preface to the second edition of the text, Nietzsche tells us that perhaps he should have written *Incipit Parodia* to crown aphorism 341.

What does this mean? Nietzsche announces the eternal return as a question, and encloses it between an ironic condemnation of a Plato's ideally tragic Socrates and Zarathustra's *Untergang*. Socrates accepts, affirms his fate, the fate of entering pure possibility, the return itself is posited as a possibility, and Zarathustra's tragedy emerges in parody as it develops. In my opinion, this alludes, to Socrates' question at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, where he wonders if the union of comedy and tragedy was a possibility, a union in that case embodied by Aristophanes, who depicted eros as that phenomenon that leads us to reclaim the lost half of our bodies, and Agathon, who bestows ethical virtues and youth upon eros. Perhaps this moment, where the longing for other bodies as a species of completion and the abstraction from those bodies as virtue meet, is the moment of parody, the moment of the comic poem besides the tragic poem, the overcoming of the tyranny of irony by virtue of the promise of repetition. We will always encounter each other again.

### **Last words: It is a matter of voice—Sing Socrates**

I will end where Nietzsche began, with *The Birth of Tragedy* where in section 14, Nietzsche cites Plato's *Phaedo*. Speaking to a dream dreamt by Socrates on the eve of his death, we are reminded that he is told to make music, to write poetry in other words. Nietzsche then suggests that perhaps we need a musical Socrates.<sup>19</sup> In a sense, Socrates' silence is ironized and his understanding that his finitude calls for him to extend himself through poiesis becomes an unspoken supplement to the emptiness left behind by his silence. And it is with this suggestion that I will conclude, for perhaps the best way to ward off the possibility of mistaking the voice of the other for an echo, is to realize that wisdom sings when it meets the outer borders of its awareness, that perhaps we



need to pay heed to aesthetics again, listening for the voice of the other silenced up to now, by our conception of an unchanging past.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony* 261. “The ironist, however, has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it...the ironist is also the sacrifice the world demands, not as if the ironist always needed in the strictest sense to fall as a sacrifice, but his fervor in the service of the world spirit consumes him.”

<sup>2</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 39, 39.

<sup>3</sup> See Kierkegaard. *Concept of Irony* 329.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Silk introduces the phrases Socrateases in his article, “Nietzsche’s Socrateases” collected in *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* edited by Michael Trapp.

<sup>5</sup> Please note that I am not necessarily reading Kierkegaard and Nietzsche with their intentions, but rather in the interstices of their processes, their engagements and descriptions of the situation of their writing.

<sup>6</sup> See Niels Nymann Eriksson. *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Repetition*, especially pages 136-164.

<sup>7</sup> See Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, “Europhone or African Memory: the challenge of the pan-Africanist intellectual in the era of globalization” collected in *African Intellectuals* edited by Thandika Mkandawire, 155-164, or see Ngugi Wa Thiong’o *Decolonizing the Mind*.

<sup>8</sup> What Kangas calls the ab-solute in his excellent monograph on Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*.

<sup>9</sup> This citation can be found in Plato. *The Last Days of Socrates*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> When one thinks about Kierkegaard’s strategy of indirect communication in dialog with his writings on irony, it becomes easy to see how his dissertation anticipated the masking of the pseudonymous writings. On pgs. 48-49 in *The Concept of Irony* he writes: “But precisely because it is the nature of irony never to unmask itself and also because a Protean change of masks is just as essential, the infatuated youth must inevitably experience so much torment. But just as there is something deterring about irony, it likewise has something extraordinarily seductive and fascinating. Its masquerading and mysteriousness, the telepathic communication it prompts because an ironist always has to be understood at a distance, the infinite sympathy it proposes, the fleeting but indescribable instant of understanding that is immediately superseded by the anxiety of misunderstanding—all this holds love prisoner in inextricable bonds.” And on pg. 251 of the same text: “In all these cases, irony manifests itself rather as the irony that comprehends the world, seeks to mystify the surrounding world, seeking not so much to remain in hiding itself as to get others to disclose themselves.” (251) And on pg. 53 in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, he writes: “One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true. Yes, in only this way can a deluded person actually be brought into what is true—by deceiving him.” In short, the Kierkegaardian text employs irony to deceive the reader into self-disclosure. Like Xenophon’s actors, the ironist wears a mask and deceives the onlooker to enact a consideration of the relationship between role-playing and the self in relation to the divine.

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<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard. Thesis VIII, *Concept of Irony*. Hereafter citations for this text will be marked CI.

<sup>12</sup> For an explanation how Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus regards Socratic epistemological possibilities, see *Philosophical Fragments*.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard's depiction of Aristophanes' *Clouds* as the best depiction of Socrates, and his argument that Socrates' existence is irony informs us of the emptying of Socrates to which I refer. Kierkegaard describes the Clouds as a figure analogous to Socratic irony on pg. 134: "...in the clouds are nothing but fog or the dim, self-affecting infinite possibility of becoming anything that is supposed to be, yet unable, to make anything remain established, the possibility that has infinite dimensions and seems to encompass the whole world but still has no content, can accept anything but remains nothing." And again on pg. 137: "The clouds always appear in a form, but Socrates knows that the form is the unessential and that the essential lies behind the form, just as the idea is the true and the predicate as such means nothing." And in a footnote on pg 221 he refers to the reflexivity Socrates' ironic personality as "abstract and without content." And on pg. 258: "For irony, everything becomes nothing, but nothing can be taken in several ways."

<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of the "to and fro of subjectivity" see Stern "Persona, Personae: Placing Kierkegaard in Conversation with Bergman." For the Kierkegaardian source, see *Repetition: A Venture in Experimental Psychology*, especially the opening paragraph on pg. 131 and the beginning of Part 2 on pg. 179.

<sup>15</sup> The hybridity attached to Phiddipedes and is explained by his father Strepsiades on pg. 17 of *Clouds*. Speaking about how his son was named, he remarks: "After that, when this son was born to us, I mean to me and my high-class wife, we started to bicker over his name. She was for adding *hippos* to the name. Xanthippos or Chaerippus or Callippides, while I was for calling him Phidonides after his grandfather. So for a while we argued, until finally we compromised and called him Phidippedes. "The footnotes in the Loeb Classics Edition of the play explain that a suffix of *hippos* conveys an aristocratic origin and that Phidonides means the thrifty one. Knowing this it becomes apparent that the aristocratic pretensions of Strepsiades wife are combined with his own meanness—excess and austerity conflate in the boy, perhaps explaining his propensity for debt.

<sup>16</sup> This is related to the idea of *controlled irony* that can be found in the last section of *The Concept of Irony*. See pages 324-329. In brief, there is a type of irony that allows one to take distance from one's habits of thought. Kierkegaard uses several examples and analogies to convey this: aesthetically Shakespeare serves as an exemplar, while existentially irony is compared to a seducer leading towards the truth but is not the truth as such. Awareness of one's own ironic comportment is key to freeing oneself of the snare of the negative infinity of *Romantic irony*.

<sup>17</sup> See the first pages of the forward to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or Volume 1*.

<sup>18</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, Aphorism 34, pg. 53*.

<sup>19</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, 71*.

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