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“Forgiveness is forgiveness:” Kierkegaard’s Spiritual Acoustics

Abstract: Kierkegaard’s distinction of chatter from silence gives forgiveness a linguistic spin. How can forgiveness be spoken? Is forgiveness something to be said and heard? Is saying it aloud saying too much, or too little? What is said when (and if) forgiveness is said? Should forgiveness be chatted away, or reserved in silence? For Kierkegaard, the answer(s) is (are) neither/nor: forgiveness can only be said indirectly, kept (almost) indistinguishable from resentment or indifference, as if discarded in the face of offense—if it is to happen.

> “In forgiveness [*Tilgivelse*] the lover believes the visible away…That which is seen, through being forgiven, is not seen.”[1]

> “Communication is a work of art…the more art, the more inwardness…the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free.”[2]

> “To those who have abandoned direct communication, the communication is made.”[3]

Kierkegaard’s distinction of chatter from silence gives forgiveness a linguistic spin. How can forgiveness be spoken? Is forgiveness something to be said and heard? Is saying it aloud saying too much, or too little? What is said when (and if) forgiveness is said? Should forgiveness be chatted away, or reserved in silence? For Kierkegaard, the answer(s) is (are) neither/nor. The marker of a liminality between the no-longer (transient, existing actuality) and the not-yet (undecided, ideal potentiality), forgiveness can only be said indirectly, kept (almost) indistinguishable from resentment or indifference, as if discarded in the face of offense

1 *SKS* 9, 186 / *WL*, 178.

2 *SKS* 7, 412 / *CUP1*, 418.

3 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, London: Oxford University Press 1933, p. 41.

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—if it is to happen. Not entirely an explicitly performative, happy illocutionary act, nor a tacit existential disposition, Kierkegaard understands forgiveness as an integration of form and content that could be better described in terms of *presence:* forgiveness is about *repeatedly being then and there*, (visibly and/or invisibly, loudly and/or silently), indirectly shaping the forgiving instant-moment-event. This paper is largely grounded in some significant passages of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* in which forgiveness is rendered possible only through an anguished, maieutic (that is, birth-giving) concern for an uncanny immediate other (the neighbor) who needs to *hear*, but cannot be told, that s/he has been forgiven.

I Forgiveness and/as Distance

In his *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics*, Bartholomew Ryan explains how the notion of chatter appears again and again in Kierkegaard's writings "via a colorful array of Danish words (e.g., *snak*, *ævl*, *vås*, *blær*, *sladder*, *passier*, *vrøvl*, *pjadder*, *ordgyderi*, *pølsesnak*, *gas*, *tøv*, *munddiarré*, *bragesnak*, *barl*, *pip*)."[4] It is both the marker of a failure ("chatter is the absolute downfall of every spiritual state of affairs")[5] and the sign of an impossibility: no one cannot *not* speak,[6] chatter being "the very medium in which everything makes sense…, not one mode of language among others, but a mode of language which consumes all others."[7] As such, chatter remains "indistinguishable from every act of speech."[8] Geoffrey Hale explains how "all philosophical problems in Kierkegaard's work ultimately confront and are confounded by their inability to free themselves from the profound negativity

4 Bartholomew Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin, and Adorno*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V. 2014, p. 196.

5 *SKS* 7, 412 / *CUP1*, 418.

6 Roger Poole and Joachim Garff affirm Kierkegaard's body (comically hunchbacked according to Peter Klæstrup, *The Corsair*'s caricaturist; "somewhat high-shouldered" according to Regina) was loaded with a "communicational intention" (Cf. Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1993, p. 15) especially when wandering around Strøget, or when delivering a sermon in *Vor Frue Kirke* with Thorvaldsen's *Christus* behind him. The sharp contrast between Kierkegaard's body and that of what was once considered the most perfect statue of Christ in the world, Poole explains, delivered a "mute" (ibid.) message on its own. More on this further on.

7 Peter Fenves, *Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1993, p. 137.

8 Ibid., p. 138.

of chatter."[9] Even Socrates is a babbler,[10] his enraptured silence remaining an obscure form of communication: unable to fully translate his *absolute* relationship with the god, he has to chat about *either* this *or* that—one dialogue at a time. By asking what chatter is (and, in the negative, what does it mean to refrain oneself "from indulging in foolish prattle"[11] [*dårlig Snak*], "to *put an end* to that *everlasting*…chatter")[12] Kierkegaard points at the limits of language itself. What is it that speaks when language speaks, and what is it that keeps on speaking, *echoing*, when language has nothing to say? Chatter, being idle talk and empty speech, is also "the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking,"[13] the *everlasting* manifestation of language,[14] and "the caricaturing externalization of inwardness."[15] Does forgiveness need this prattling to be done with, or is it another everlasting form of caricaturing, externalizing, *foolish prattle?* If so, what is being externalized? What does it caricaturize? How can it avoid the "passionate disjunction" between reserve and speech? In short, what can forgiveness *say?*

Peter Fenves has shown how chatter emerges in Kierkegaardian works when language attempts to speak of something which remains irreducible to language,[16] namely, when the impossibility of communication is traded for an attempt to communicate the impossible.[17] Forgiveness, for Kierkegaard, is marked by this impossibility. Timothy A. Bennington claims *Philosophical Fragments* is a text burdened with the impossible task,[18] of explaining "something that thought cannot

9 Geoffrey A. Hale, "Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard by Peter Fenves," in *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 110, no. 3, German Issue 1995, p. 671.

10 On the inside front cover of a copy of *Om Begrebet Ironi*, Kierkegaard wrote: "Actually it was Cato who first declared that Socrates was a *Schwatzer* [babbler] who wanted to turn things topsy-turvy for his people" (*SKS* 1, 441 / *CI*, 448).

11 Cf. *SKS* 7, 71 / *CUP1*, 76.

12 Cf. *SKS* 7, 448 / *CUP1*, 451.

13 Cf. *SKS* 6, 87 / *TA*, 93. See also Fenves, *Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard*, p. 230.

14 Cf. Hale, "Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard by Peter Fenves," pp. 670–674.

15 *SKS* 6, 94 / *TA*, 99.

16 Cf. Fenves, *Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard*, p. 143.

17 Cf. Hale, "Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard by Peter Fenves." In a way, this irreducibility ultimately includes anything and everything. In his two book reviews, Kierkegaard insists on the impossibility of (re)presenting life in language. When the novelist creates what Kierkegaard calls a life-view, he ultimately produces a "life" that no longer corresponds to the vital texture of lived experience. The conversion of life into language always fails, as the uncontainable irruption of chatter into the purely literary presentation of a life-view shows.

18 Cf. Timothy A. Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible: Theology and Deconstruction in Johannes Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments*," in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2021, p. 117.

think."[19] The same can be said of most (if not of all) Kierkegaardian literature. Both in *Fragments* and in *Postscript*, Climacus strains to think the incarnation "without pretending to be a Christian"[20]—an assignment he describes as "most difficult,"[21] even "impossible."[22] Whether in fragments or in a postscript, explaining the incarnation ("a paradigmatic combination of form and content, a paradoxical reality that bursts apart all binaries")[23] is, for Kierkegaard, purposely self-defeating. As Bennington puts it, "the absolute paradox—that Christ spans the infinite qualitative difference between creator and creature—makes the direct communication of Christianity [and thus of the forgiveness of sins, which follows from the incarnation] impossible. Christ does not convey information. Rather, he embodies truth in *a paradoxical entanglement of form and content.*"[24]

Mark C. Taylor has observed how another pseudonym, Johannes *De Silentio*, "has no thesis…, no conclusions, provides no answers to his questions, gives no solutions to his problems and offers no results of his research."[25] Like Christ, *Fear and Trembling* does not convey any information either. Even the structure of the book, Taylor notes, is all preliminary and ends in an epilogue. Are these texts but chatter, or is their uninformative presence a way of resisting it? Sylvia Walsh claims "Kierkegaard tried valiantly but ended up capitulating to it"[26]—to chatter, that is. Bennington says that he was "giving birth to the impossible"[27] instead, in a typically maieutic manner. I want to push Bennington's intuition further: Kierkegaard attempts to give birth to the impossible *in the ugly* (i. e., in the offense that calls for forgiveness), consciously confronting Diotima's maxim in *Symposium*[28]—"it is not possible to give birth in what is ugly, only in the beautiful." Forgiveness, to be forgiveness, must occur not in the "beauty" of

19 *SKS* 4, 261 / *PF*, 46.

20 *SKS* 7, 460 / *CUP1*, 466.

21 Cf. *SKS* 7, 460 / *CUP1*, 466.

22 Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible," p. 117. See also *SKS* 7, 611 / *CUP1*, 617.

23 Cf. Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible," pp. 117–118.

24 Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible," p. 130, italics are mine.

25 Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, p. 322.

26 Sylvia Walsh, "Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard (review)" in *Philosophy and Literature,* vol. 18, no. 2, 1994, p. 392.

27 Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible," p. 117.

28 Plato, *Symposium*, 201e, 205e-206d: "All human beings are pregnant, Socrates, in body and in soul, and when we reach maturity, it is natural that we desire to give birth. *It is not possible to give birth in what is ugly, only in the beautiful.* I say that because the intercourse of a man and a woman is a kind of giving birth. It is something divine, this process of pregnancy and procreation. It is an aspect of immortality in the otherwise mortal creature, and *it cannot take place in what is discordant.*"

repentance (when the "ugly" wrongdoer is already contrite) but in sin itself. The "elucidation of other possibilities of existence"[29] that makes the impossible birthing of a new beginning possible, Kierkegaard insists all throughout his oeuvre, happens (only) in the wrong.

Anti-Climacus paraphrases Simeon's blessing[30] to say the God-Man "is a sign, the sign of contradiction; he is unrecognizable [and] therefore any direct communication is impossible."[31] Climacus agrees, and follows the only option available: "rather than claiming to have comprehended the God-Man, or believing that he has extracted a nugget of theological truth…that he can reliably communicate, he imitates the paradox with a paradox of his own."[32] His writing is an *imitatio Christi*, a performative appropriation of the "*sēmeion antilegomenon*," a textual embodiment of the (sign of) contradiction. This performative texture of Kierkegaardian writings is key, as it *does* what the texts do not *say*. The God-In-Time being the absolute paradox, "the strangest thing of all,"[33] any attempt to say anything about him must also remain unrecognizable, providing no answers, giving no solutions, offering no results—perhaps only a(n) (ugly) caricature.

Kierkegaard understands the presence of the god-in-time as demanding from the individual the recognition of the unrecognizable, not contradicting the contradiction. If embraced, the individual gains awareness of her/his own wrongful state[34] and accepts the forgiveness of sins as the paradox par excellence. Since the incarnation is for Kierkegaard the decisive moment in the Christian history

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29 Cf. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1975, p. 57.

30 Cf. Luke 2, 34: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising (*ptōsin kai anastasin*) of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed (*sēmeion antilegomenon*)." (*SKS* 12, 141 / *PC*, 134).

31 *SKS* 12, 141 / *PC*, 134.

32 Bennington, "Giving Birth to the Impossible," p. 130.

33 *SKS* 4, 314 / *PF*, 101.

34 *SKS* 3, 608 / *EO2*, 601. According to Taylor, Kierkegaard found the reason why Plato's dialogues end without any result (without any "positive" claim) to be "an expression of Socrates' maieutic art that makes the reader, or the hearer, himself active, and so does not end in a result but in a sting." (Cf. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p. 61.) It is a wound that causes the reader the more painful feeling imaginable—that of being always in the wrong. This, to bring about her or his edification—an edification that has nothing to do with acquiring any new "positive" knowledge: it is rather an indirect invitation to refrain from the kind of relief one could find in speech, a seduction into destroying communication. This "destruction of communication" is, for Climacus, a Socratic feature: "Neither did it ever occur to Socrates, after having disparaged ordinary human knowledge, to want to be admired for a higher understanding or to want to involve himself directly with any human being, since he in his ignorance had essentially destroyed communication with all others" (*SKS* 7, 560 / *CUP1*, 566).

of salvation (without incarnation there is no passion, no crucifixion, and no resurrection) the forgiveness of sins shares its unrecognizable, offensive, "ugly" form-content entanglement. In that sense, forgiveness is a hypostatic union of the external and the internal, a disjoint unification of hiddenness (it "hides" the ugliness of sin) and revelation (as it points at the ugly by having to hide it, while also uncovering the unrecognizable presence of the timeless when bringing about other existential possibilities). Forgiveness, like the incarnation, is a fulfilling yet self-diminishing movement, a kenotic "reduction of oneself to nobody"[35] leading to new becomings. If rejected ("there is no forgiveness of sins, it is impossible"),[36] the intersection of the non-temporal with time is discarded, the form-content entanglement done away with, the (absolute) presence of forgiveness swapped for either crumbs [*Smuler*] or for "the pods that the pigs were eating."[37] Chatter reveals this complexity by circumvallating the communicational impossibility, as if besieging it. I use this word, "besieging," very much on purpose, since Kierkegaard describes forgiveness (and its rejection) in war-related terms in at least three different texts: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *The Sickness unto Death*, and *Works of Love.*

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus presents the forgiveness of sins [*Syndernes Forladelse*] as a "paradoxical atonement on the *strength* of the absurd."[38] The word *absurd* here refers to at least two things: the *surdum* (the silence resisting the noisy relief of speech, that "which indeed cannot be thought")[39] and, again, to the incarnation—"the absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc."[40] How is the absurd "strong"? What does it (en)*force?* Climacus understands forgiveness as *decided* in time (and describes decision as

35 *SKS* 12, 140 / *PC*, 132–133

36 *SKS* 11, 229 / *SUD*, 114.

37 Lk 15, 16.

38 *SKS* 7, 71 / *CUP1*, 76. To refer to forgiveness, Kierkegaard uses the Danish verbs *at tilgive* and *at forlade*, and their corresponding nouns *Tilgivelse* and *Forladelse.* John Lippitt explains that "the primary lens through which Kierkegaard views forgiveness is the forgiveness of sins [*Syndernes Forladelse*]" (John Lippitt, *Love's Forgiveness: Kierkegaard, Resentment, Humility, and Hope*, New York: Oxford University Press 2020, p. 67). However, Kierkegaard uses *Tilgivelse* approximately twice as often as *Forladelse. Forladelse*, Lippitt clarifies, "has a far more liturgical resonance than *Tilgivelse*, which has a much broader usage." Kierkegaard's alternative use of both words suggests that he was interested in everyday, common, interpersonal forgiveness (*Tilgivelse*) as much as in the divine, liturgical forgiveness of sins (*Forladelse*).

39 *SKS* 7, 97 / *CUP1*, 100.

40 *SKS* 7, 206 / *CUP1*, 210.

"making a beginning in the moment necessary")[41] following from an event considered historical. This decisive character of forgiveness is crucial: who decides what? Is forgiveness something the individual decides to bring into existence, or is it something only the god-in-time can do? Climacus answers by misquoting a passage in the *Theaetetus:* "Giving birth indeed *belongs to the god.*"[42] The incarnation is (at least for Climacus) a (divine) willful historic event occurring "in the fullness of time"[43] that nevertheless, "according to its own nature, cannot become historical and consequently must become that by virtue of the absurd."[44] Since forgiveness derives from it, it shares its unthinkable historicity, its decidedly and decisively being *forced* into history by *the god*, and its marking a new (impossible) beginning—the guilty being blameworthy yet justified, paradoxically *simul iustus et peccator.*

Similarly, in *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus explains forgiveness as a "mad *battle* for possibility" in the face of impossibility.[45] Both Climacus and Anti-Climacus thus ultimately understand forgiveness as a forceful task—as if compelling the unsounded into sound, the non-temporal into the historical. When forgiveness is "repudiated" or considered unnecessary, a specific kind of chatter resumes.[46] This kind of prattling appears, we read in *Works of Love*, under the guise of a *mitigating explanation* that "*wrests* something away from the multitude [of sins] by showing that this and that were not sin."[47] Forgiveness, on the contrary, does not explain (nor "conveys") anything. It chats about everything but about itself: Kierkegaard notes how Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him "more than these" but never tells him (at least not explicitly) he has forgiven his triple denial—or not.[48] Later in *Works of Love* (specifically, in the conclusions) Kierkegaard just says "forgiveness **is** forgiveness," allowing the word to echo once, as if it were barely audible, too weak to reverberate any further—not even three times, à la Peter. It is on this quasi-aphorism, "forgiveness **is** forgiveness," where this paper finds its anchor. The repetition suggests both atonement (at-one-ment, *ad-unamentum*, the unity of both *forgivenesses*, "forgiveness **is** forgiveness") and a reverberation (a differentiating yet *tuned*, syn-tonized echo). The highlighted "**is**" works as the (temporal and spatial)

41 *SKS* 4, 255 / *PF*, 52. See also 1 Cor 1, 23.
42 *SKS* 4, 225 / *PF*, 11, italics are mine.
43 Cf. Gal 4, 4.
44 *SKS* 7, 381 / *CUP1*, 385.
45 *SKS* 11, 153 / *SUD*, 38.
46 *SKS* 11, 228 / *SUD*, 114.
47 *SKS* 9, 186. / *WL*, 178.
48 Cf. Jn 21, 15. Cf. *SKS* 9, 176–185 / *WL*, 167–172.

minimal *distance* (an "important recurring motif in Kierkegaard's writings")[49] separating one from the other—a distance described in *The Sickness unto Death* as a "crevice [*Rift*]."[50]

Kierkegaard accompanies his "forgiveness **is** forgiveness" dictum with a clarifying commentary. It is, however, neither exhaustive nor mitigating. Perhaps from fear of indulging in *dårlig Snak*, the explanation abstains from fully unpacking what the quasi-aphorism hints at, and relies on the indirect, performative, and acoustic capacities of the phrase, as much as in its typographical presence—the **is** being highlighted in the original Danish. Like Bennington's Christ, the expression "provides nothing," but embodies forgiveness despite (or thanks to) its tautological form-content interweaving. The paragraph reads:

> Forgiveness **is** forgiveness; your forgiveness is your forgiveness; your forgiveness of another is your own forgiveness; the forgiveness which you give you receive, not contrariwise that you give the forgiveness which you receive. It is as if Christianity would say: pray to God humbly and believing in your forgiveness, for he really is compassionate in such a way as no human being is; but if you will test how it is with respect to the forgiveness, *then observe yourself.* If honestly before God you wholeheartedly forgive your enemy (but remember that if you do, God sees it), then you dare hope also for your forgiveness, *for it is one and the same.*[51]

To better understand what the phrase and the paragraph *do* (and thus, "say") I lean on what Kevin Hart has called "spiritual acoustics"[52]—hence the title of this paper. Just like the forgiveness of sins is a matter of strength (Climacus) or a mad battle (Anti-Climacus), and the mitigating explanation a wrest (Kierkegaard), despairing of the forgiveness of sins (the decision to put an end to possibility, to quash all undecided potentiality) is also a clash. Anti-Climacus describes it as a hand-to-hand fight that, because of its closeness, leaves no room for forgiveness to *resonate.*

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49 Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 54.

50 *SKS* 11, 187 / *SUD*, 73: "Just as the troll in the fairy story disappears through a crevice that no one can see, so it is with despair: the more spiritual it is, the more urgent it is to dwell in an externality behind which no one would ordinarily think of looking for it. This secrecy is itself something spiritual and is one of the safeguards to ensure having, as it were, an in-closure [*Indelukke*] behind actuality, a world ex-clusively [*udelukkende*] for itself, a world where the self in despair is restlessly and tormentedly engaged in willing to be itself."

51 *SKS* 9, 355 / *WL*, 348, italics are mine.

52 Cf. Kevin Hart, "Spiritual Acoustics: On Being in Common (Kierkegaard, Husserl, Henry)," *Analecta Hermeneutica*, vol. 8, 2016, p. 278.

> When the sinner despairs of the forgiveness of sins, it is almost as if he walked right up to God and said, "No, there is no forgiveness of sins, it is *impossible*," and *it looks like close combat.* Yet *to be able to say this* and *for it to be heard*, a person must become qualitatively distanced from God, and in order to fight *cominus* [in close combat] he must be *eminus* [at a distance]—so wondrously is the life of the spirit *acoustically constructed*, so wondrously are the ratios of distance established.[53]

Saying the despairing of forgiveness needs a (qualitative) distance (like that of the crevice) to be said and heard, claiming this saying and listening is a belligerent matter, and describing the life of the spirit as acoustically constructed, reveal that the Kierkegaardian linguistic turn concerning the question of forgiveness has a ~~meta~~physical dimension. The erasure in "~~meta~~physical" obviously points at the need to use this term as much as to its inadequacy, but I also include it to refer to Kierkegaard's own *Krims-Krams*, his constant crossing out and doodling over his own writings.[54] His jotting and scribbling over his work looks like an undoing—as if he were asking for forgiveness by drawing caricatures, rewriting, striking out his own words, amending what he had done. Since Kierkegaard understands communication as a work of art (and forgiveness as a form of communication) forgiveness (and despairing of it) ends up being a warlike *techné* that widens [*eminus*, "far"] and bridges [*cominus*, "near"][55] spiritual acoustic distances in time and space—a matter of engaging and disengaging, of affiancing ("espousing") and breaking up, of referring to the *distant* foundational forgiving event of the incarnation and bringing it ("forcing" it) into the *nearness* of the present. Like the erasure, forgiveness is at a time the everlasting deletion and the undying remaining of a past offense. And, like the caricature, it turns something (the past, the wrongdoer, the offense) into something it is not. I want to propose two different ways to think these distances and this *techné.* One that I will call ~~*meta*~~*physical*, and one that will be briefly referred to as *aesthetic* in the final part of this text. One can be considered the flipside of the other, as both are informed by Kierkegaard's own distancing from Regina Olsen. By breaking his engagement, by *disengaging*, he was bound to her in a new indissoluble, *cominus/eminus* relationship.

53 *SKS* 11, 228 / *SUD*, 114.

54 Cf. Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 308.

55 "*Cominus et eminus*," near and far, was the Latin motto of the Order of the Porcupine. The quills of the animal allow him to attack from up close while keeping a safe distance.

II Kierkegaard's Forgiving ~~Meta~~physics

The metaphysical reading leans mainly on Kierkegaard's own use and knowledge of physics, and tangentially on his reception of Hamann's metaschematism and metacriticism. The very little attention paid to Kierkegaard's indebtedness to Hamann has been accurately referred to by John R. Betz as a "systematic theological oversight."[56] Seminal works like those of Steven Shakespeare[57] and Geoffrey A. Hale[58] suggest Kierkegaard's "contemporaneity [*samtidighed*]," a notion thoroughly shaping his approach to the forgiveness of sins, derives from Hamann's *Metaschematismus*, an extension of (Augustinian) typology (the Christian practice of reading Scripture in such a way that people and events of the Gospels are considered foreshadowed or figured by those of the Hebrew Bible), yet with an important twist.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul urges the community to lay aside their divisions. He does so by writing about his own close (*cominus*) relationship to Apollos ("I planted, Apollos watered"). In so doing, he tangentially points at those would sow division (*eminus*, if you will) in the community.[59] That is, Paul indirectly leads the Corinthian church to an understanding of its contentious situation: "I have applied all this to Apollos and myself [*meteschēmatisa eis emauton kai Apollōn*] for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so *that you may learn through us.*"[60] Leaning on the Pauline use of the word *meteschēmatisa*, Hamann calls the process *metaschematisieren* and extends its meaning way beyond biblical sources. As the Corinthian community learns through others, Hamann appreciates the present as legible only with reference to the future (as if pregnant with prophetic expectation) and the past as only understandable with reference to the present (as if fulfilled in the here-and-now). Past, present, and future are thus bound together and reciprocally clarified: "Can the past be understood when not even the present is understood? And who will form correct ideas of the present without knowing the future?", Hamann asks in his *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters.* "The future," he goes on, "determines the present, and the

56 See John R. Betz, "Hamann Before Kierkegaard: a Systematic Theological Oversight," in *Pro Ecclesia*, vol. 16 no. 3, 2007, pp. 299–333.

57 See Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard, Language, and the Reality of God*, London: Taylor and Francis 2018.

58 See Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002.

59 Cf. 1 Cor 3, 4.

60 1 Cor 4, 6.

present determines the past, as the purpose determines the nature and use of the means."[61]

James C. O'Flaherty explains Hamannian metaschematism as the substitution of "a set of objective relationships for an analogous set of personal or existential relationships or the reverse, in order to determine, through the insight born of faith, their common meaning."[62] Kierkegaardian contemporaneity shares this structure. Just like no one cannot *not* speak, the contemporary Christian cannot *not* be in a personal relationship, through faith, with the incarnation. Patrick Stokes explains how "Kierkegaard speaks of believers in Christianity as attaining a form of 'contemporaneity' with events depicted in scripture, a contemporaneity that cancels out the difference between historical witnesses of those events and those living centuries later."[63] This contemporaneity is fundamentally a "contemporaneity-with-Christ" that disregards the direct composition of the experience, allowing the (past) event of the incarnation to reverberate (that is, to be indirectly present) in the present: "if the divinity of Jesus can't be directly perceived, then whatever confers contemporaneity cannot be contained within the *sensibilia* that constitute the substance of the imaginative reconstruction."[64] Kierkegaard understands the impossibility to directly perceive the forgiving, kenotic, incarnate divinity in terms of distance –not of absence. By doing so, he avoids the presence-absence binary and permits the "imaginative reconstruction" Stokes proposes to use other kinds of ~~meta~~physical resources and presences—echoes, reverberations, repetitions, metaschematical existential relationships. The original forgiving event is not immediately present for the person who becomes a Christian in 1846, but that does not mean that person has no access to it: the event is kept at a near temporal distance (*eminus/cominus*) that permits it to resonate in time (a ~~meta~~physical, spiritual acoustic phenomenon), from the *eminus* past into the *cominus* present, thus cancelling out the difference between historical witnesses of those events and those living centuries later. Climacus asks:

> But what does it mean to say that one can be contemporary without, however, being contemporary, consequently that one can be contemporary and yet, although using this advantage (in the sense of immediacy) be a noncontemporary—what else does this mean except that one

61 Johann Georg Hamann, "Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters," in *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. and trans. by Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 45–46.

62 See James C. O'Flaherty, "Introduction" to *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia*, trans. by James C. O'Flaherty, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1967, pp. 17–19.

63 Patrick Stokes, *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 55.

64 Ibid.

> simply cannot be immediately contemporary with a teacher and event of that sort, so that the real contemporary is not that by virtue of immediate contemporaneity but by virtue of something else.[65]

The *other* non-immediate form of contemporaneity Climacus refers to, insofar as it is not dependent on any direct experience but on "something else," is always at hand. Not being just for the contemporary, it can even extend to those who lived *before* the event.[66] As Taylor puts it, "all persons are equidistant from the event [of the incarnation]; all are contemporaries of the God-Man."[67] The moment in history at which the individual lives is thus irrelevant. But what does this contemporaneity consist of? And how is it related to the question asking whether forgiveness should be said or not? Climacus continues:

> There is not and cannot be any question of a follower at second hand, for the believer (and only he, after all, is a follower) continually has *the autopsy of faith*; he does not see with the eyes of others and sees only the same as every believer sees—with the eyes of faith.[68]

Stokes notes how Kierkegaard's use of the word "autopsy" gives a visual (rather than acoustic) texture to the notion of contemporaneity, as it refers to a personal act of seeing something for oneself (*autos-optos*). The non-contemporary might not be "an eyewitness (in the sense of immediacy)" but still gets to "see for himself," so that "every noncontemporary (in the sense of immediacy) is in turn a contemporary."[69] This "seeing for oneself" is ostensibly metaphorical. Considering Climacus insists on denying the direct recognizability of the god-man (not even contemporaries could recognize the god as such based solely on his appearance), these visual references seem out of place. Seeing a forgiving gesture would certainly do away with the need to "say" or "hear" forgiveness. Images, Climacus explains, can also reverberate via repetition: the non-contemporary tries to prolong contemporaneity sketching portraits, "whole series of pictures depicting and exactly reproducing every change that age and mental attitude may have

65 *SKS* 4, 270 / *PF*, 67.

66 Kierkegaard's Socrates prefigures Christ, as in Justin Martyr's *First Apology:* "those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them." (Cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 46, in *Fathers of the Church Patristic Series*, vol 6, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2008, pp. 33–114.

67 Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, p. 303.

68 *SKS* 4, 218 / *PF*, 102.

69 *SKS* 4, 288 / *PF*, 270–271.

brought about in the external form of that teacher."[70] And still, the non-contemporary does not "dare to believe his eyes."[71] Climacus' doubt mimics (or mocks) that of Thomas. The apostle will not believe unless he sees "the mark of the nails in his hands."[72] Climacus insists the god "cannot be envisioned" instead.[73] Other forms of witnessing are still necessary. Reflecting on how memory "speaks" in one of his journals, Kierkegaard notes:

> The marvelous way in which something that happened long ago can suddenly leap into the consciousness is really remarkable—for example, the memory of something wrong, something one was scarcely conscious of in the moment of action—a flash of lightening which intimates a great thunderstorm. It does not step forward but actually leaps forward with tremendous power and *claims to be heard.*[74]

That something that happened long ago can claim to be *heard*, that memory can act acoustically, highlights the importance of sound (and its primacy over sight) in Kierkegaardian literature. This is distinctive Hamannian heritage. Hamannian metacriticism (at least as presented in the *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, the first assessment of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, written in 1784 but published in 1800, only after Hamann's death) proposes that even Kantian a priori analytic propositions are first and foremost acoustic and linguistic inscriptions: the faculty of thought is possible only because language has a genealogic priority before "the seven holy functions of logical propositions and inferences" (that is, the table of categories).[75] Therefore, language is introduced in the *Metacritique* as the pure a priori form and as the true aesthetic element of all human reason and knowledge: "sounds and letters are…pure forms a priori, in which nothing belonging to the sensation or concept of an object is found; they are the true, aesthetic elements of all human knowledge and reason."[76] Kierkegaard's

70 *SKS* 4, 236 / *PF*, 63.
71 *SKS* 4, 236 / *PF*, 63.
72 Jn 20, 25.
73 *SKS* 4, 236 / *PF*, 63.
74 *Pap* XI-1 A 330 / *JP* 1, 390, italics are mine.
75 Johann Georg Hamann, "Metacritique on the Purism of Reason," in *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. 211.
76 Ibid: "Not only is the entire faculty of thought founded on language, according to the unrecognized prophecies and slandered miracles of the very commendable Samuel Heinicke, but language is also the centerpoint of reason's misunderstanding with itself, partly because of the frequent coincidence of the greatest and the smallest concept, its vacuity and its plenitude in ideal propositions, partly because of the infinite [advantage] of rhetorical over inferential figures, and much more of the same…Sounds and letters are therefore pure forms a priori, in which nothing

understanding of spiritual life as acoustically constructed depends on Hamann's appreciation of sound as a fundamentally *aesthetic* (in the strict sense of the term) element that, even when not directly perceived, can still be indirectly noticed in its (present) reverberating(s)—that is, in its present *repetitions*.

As Rebecca Skaggs rightly notes, repetition is for Kierkegaard a religious category mainly referring to a Christian conception of time: "the moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other and with this the concept of temporality is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time."[77] These *constants* are critical for forgiveness, since the persistent intersection (the *repetition* Constantin Constantius constantly refers to) is ultimately the forgiving restoration of oneself. The final meaning of the term "repetition" as the reestablishment of a prior, pre-lapsarian state is explicitly affirmed in Constantius' text as a *redintegratio in statum pristinum*[78]—a typically Hamannian, metaschematical reading of the culpable present considering a (future) forgiving restoration of (past) Edenic innocence.

Hamann's great concern was language. A letter sent to Herder in 1784 makes it clear: "If I were only as eloquent as Demosthenes," Hamann writes, "I would need to do no more than repeat one phrase three times: reason is language, *logos*; on this marrowbone I gnaw and will gnaw myself to death over it."[79] The letter partially reveals his understanding of language as thoroughly theological, but later writings make it clear that Hamann sees language, including the language of nature, as the means of God's revelation to humankind and, thus, as the crossroads of the non-temporal with time, Daniel O. Dahlstrom notes how he (Hamann) understood "that from the beginnings of humanity 'every phenomenon of nature was a word,' a conviction canceling any philosophical pretensions to being able to distinguish between sign (spirit) and signified (nature)."[80] This "sacramental" understanding of language, Hamannian scholars largely agree, leans on the Lutheran doctrine sometimes referred to as *consubstantiation*. Catholic and Orthodox *transubstantiation* posits that, when consecrated, the *substances* of bread and wine are converted into the body and blood of Christ,

belonging to the sensation or concept of an object is found; they are the true, aesthetic elements of all human knowledge and reason."

77 *SKS* 4, 398 / *CA*, 89.

78 *SKS* 4, 241 / *FT*, 144.

79 Hamann, *Briefe*, vol. V, p. 177, as quoted by Kenneth Hayes, "Introduction," in *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. xiv.

80 Daniel O. Dahlstrom, "The Aesthetic Holism of Hamann, Herder, and Schiller," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. by Karl Ameriks, New York: Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 81.

but the *appearances* of bread and wine remain. Luther contended that both the body and blood of Christ *and* the bread and wine of the elements were present together in the eucharistic species. For Hamann, this implied a holistic unity of letter and spirit that became his weapon of choice "against what he took to be the impoverishing discourse of Enlightenment philosophy."[81] As when extending the use of metaschematism beyond biblical texts, Hamann took the notion of *consubstantiation* to language, proposing a kind of writing in which, Hayes explains, "letter and spirit must both be present, body and symbol must co-inhere."[82] Is this not what we see in Kierkegaard's "forgiveness **is** forgiveness" dictum? Kierkegaard's cryptic, pseudo-tautological sentence is, I think, a proper form-content consubstantiation: a textual and acoustic presence of the past event of forgiveness (the "forgiveness" *preceding* the **is**) conveying nothing, but still echoing (the "forgiveness" *following* the **is**), as if trying to re-establish forgiveness (one into the other, for they are "one and the same"), saving it from the "absolute downfall of every spiritual state of affairs."

When saying language is "the pure a priori form," Hamann (rather ironically) points at its historicity. He refers to music as "the oldest language" and to painting and drawing as "the oldest writing," historically transmitting and shaping our concepts of time (because of the succession of sounds in music) and space (because of the organization of visual elements in painting).[83] His use of Kantian jargon, and his calling language a pure "a priori form" is intentionally taunting, ridiculing, caricaturing Kantian categories. Haynes rightly says that Kant's arguments are not answered by Hamann (and may not have been understood by him), but that is for the most part irrelevant.[84] Hamann is less interested in rebuking arguments than in stressing the contrast between the abstract purity of philosophy and the embodied history of lived experience—the same criticism Kierkegaardian vitalism wields against the Hegelian system. "To complain that the mockery is unfair to Kant," Hayes writes, "is to miss Hamann's point: it is not that particular

81 Hayes, "Introduction," in *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. xv.

82 Ibid.

83 Hamann, "Metacritique on the Purism of Reason," in *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, pp. 211–212: "The oldest language was music, and along with the palpable rhythm of the pulse and of the breath in the nostrils, it was the original bodily image of all temporal measures and intervals. The oldest writing was painting and drawing, and therefore was occupied as early as then with the economy of space, its limitation and determination by figures. Thence, under the exuberant persistent influence of the two noblest senses sight and hearing, the concepts of space and time have made themselves so universal and necessary in the whole sphere of the understanding (just as light and air are for the eye, ear, and voice) that as a result space and time, if not *ideae innatae*, seem to be at least *matrices* of all intuitive knowledge."

84 Hayes, "Introduction" to *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. x.

philosophical arguments need to be refuted but that the motivation behind them (a desire for mathematical certainty, Hamann alleges in Kant's case) stands in need of scrutiny and exposure."[85] In short, Hamann's argument against Kant is that "philosophy cannot create itself *ex nihilo* because it always presumes upon the adequacy and intelligibility of its own language. Something has always gone before *to which language bears witness.*"[86]

Kierkegaard shares Hamann's recognition of the critical importance of language as a presupposition not only for philosophy but for self-consciousness in general—an argument also playing an important role in his reception and criticism of Hegelianism. Although not widely regarded a philosopher of language, Kierkegaard's philosophy stems from an acute awareness of the fact that "we are given language"[87] not only through historical transmission but also "as it occurs,"[88] according to the principle of contemporaneity: all speakers create meaning in the present, as they speak ("as it occurs") by recurring to (the universality of) language. In other words, Kierkegaard's take on language assumes that "in spite of all rules of grammar and all the demands of universality in language, we can never know what language means prior to its occurrence."[89] Any present ("contemporary") act of speech, even if dependent on something that "has gone before," also modifies this "before" by bringing it into the present. Taylor explains it by alluding at language's capacity to annul what Kierkegaard refers to as "immediacy."[90] For Climacus, immediacy is reality [*Realiteten*] and language [*Sproget*] is ideality [*Idealiteten*]. Reality, when expressed in language, falls back into ideality, "which is a contradiction, an untruth."[91] Climacus' way out of the contradiction implies the annulment of immediacy through mediacy, which he identifies with "the word" [*Ordet*]—not the universality of language alone, but the actualization of said universality in what is being *now* said, a hypostatic union of "then" (universality) and "now" ("as it occurs"), of the universal (*Sproget*) and the act of speech (*Ordet*). Kierkegaard's use of the word *Ordet*, (in contrast with *Sproget*) alludes to both the first verse of John's gospel, "*I Begyndelsen var Ordet* [*In the beginning there was the Word*]," and to the capacity to use language, thus establishing yet another metaschematical-contemporaneous relationship between one and the

85 Ibid., p. xi.
86 Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard, Language, and the Reality of God*, p. 57, italics are mine.
87 Hale, *Kierkegaard and the Ends of Language*, p. 2.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Cf. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, pp. 157–158.
91 *SKS* 7, 67 / *CUP1*, 70.

other. *Ordet* annuls immediacy "by talking about it, for that which is talked about is always presupposed."[92]

This something that *has gone before*, what is *presupposed* (the incarnate *Ordet*) is the cornerstone of Kierkegaard's take on forgiveness: "the forgiveness you give you receive, not contrariwise that you give the forgiveness which you receive," the forgiveness(es) received and given being reverberations ("witnesses") of the foundational forgiving event (the incarnation of the *Ordet*, the *consubstantiation* of the non-temporal and time) from which all forgiveness derives as a river from its source. In that sense, the possibility of forgiveness works in Kierkegaardian literature as an index of the vital, existential enmeshment of past, present, and future.

III Spiritual Acoustics: the Neighbor is the Ugly

Kierkegaard's knowledge (and use) of physics is intimately related to his appropriation of Hamann's thoughts on metaschematism, language, and sound—and, consequently, to his ~~*meta*~~*physical* approach to forgiveness. In his article on "spiritual acoustics," Kevin Hart has recalled how Hans Christian Ørsted taught Kierkegaard physics.[93] Ørsted's acoustic experiments were of significant interest in Golden Age Copenhagen, a period of exceptional creative production during the first half of the 19th century, mainly catalyzed by German Romanticism—Hamann being "the forgotten source of a movement [German Romanticism, that is] that in the end engulfed the whole of European culture."[94] Bjarne Troelsen goes on to say Ørsted "was one of the most significant and influential personalities of his day and age together with the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, the poet Hans Christian Andersen,"[95] and Kierkegaard himself. In a journal entry dated in 1835, Kierkegaard described Ørsted's face as resembling "a Chladni figure that nature had touched in the right way."[96]

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92 *SKS* 7, 164 / *CUP1*, 168.

93 Cf. Bjarne Troelsen, "Hans Christian Ørsted: Søren Kierkegaard and the Spirit in Nature," in *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries; Tome I: Philosophy, Politics, and Social Theory*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Abingdon: Routledge 2016, pp. 215–225. It should be noted Ørsted's *Habilitationsschrift* was a defense and further development of Kant's metaphysics of nature. His works, although not as much as those of Hamann, are partially responsible for Kierkegaard's own Kantianism.

94 Isaiah Berlin, "The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism," in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Herder, Hamann*, ed. by Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013, pp. 4–5.

95 Troelsen, "Hans Christian Ørsted: Søren Kierkegaard and the Spirit in Nature," p. 215.

96 Kevin Hart, "Spiritual Acoustics," p. 278.

Chladni figures are complex and often uncannily beautiful patterns caused by different modes of sound vibrating through rigid surfaces. These figures are named after Ernst Chladni, the noted German physicist, philosopher, and musician commonly regarded as the father of acoustics. His best-known experiment (included in his *Discoveries in the Theory of Sound*) showed that, when resonating, a surface gets divided into regions that vibrate in opposite directions, bounded by dark, thick, "nodal" lines where no vibration occurs. The experiment basically consisted of rubbing a bow over a piece of metal or glass like one normally does with a violin or any other bowed string instrument. The surface would be lightly covered with sand. The resulting vibration causes the sand to move and concentrate along the lines where the surface is still, creating different patterns depending on the frequency of the resonation produced by the bow, making sound *visible.* Chladni called these patterns *Klangfiguren*, "sound figures." Since Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Crumbs* describes despairing at the forgiveness of sins (being "offended at the paradox") as an "acoustic illusion,"[97] I deem the "forgiveness **is** forgiveness" dictum also as a *Klangfigur*, the **is** being the dark, thick nodal line marking the separation between one resonating region and the other, the forgiveness of another and one's own forgiveness, the forgiveness given and the one received.

Anders Engberg-Pedersen and Oliver Simons explain that "the significance of these [Chladni's] experiments goes well beyond acoustic physics. As figures of thought they have captured the imagination of philosophers, psychologists, and artists ever since."[98] Nietzsche's references to Ernst Chladni found in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* are relatively well-known.[99] Kierkegaard's references are less known, even if his understanding of spiritual life as acoustically constructed is inspired by Hamannian philosophy as much as by Chladni's investigations. What Engels-Pedersen and Simons say about Nietzsche also applies to Kierkegaard—namely, that the epistemological context of Chladni's experiments is very different from the acoustic sphere of Kierkegaard's philosophy. And still, "a range of acoustic phenomena…were transposed into a larger cultural discourse and thus transformed into figures of thought that came to structure various aspects of literary and philosophical discourse,"[100] where they find themselves at home. Studies like those of Cornelio Fabro understand that "a great part of

97 *SKS* 4, 239 / *PF*, 49.

98 Cf. Anders Engberg-Pedersen and Oliver Simons, "Sound Figures: Between Physics and Aesthetics," *The Germanic Review*, vol. 93, 2018, pp. 329–333.

99 See Steven Lydon's "Nietzsche's Interpretation of Chladni's Sound Figures," *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, vol. 8, 2016, pp. 83–89.

100 Engberg-Pedersen and Simons, "Sound Figures," p. 331.

the literary output of Kierkegaard is *but an echo*" of his breaking up with Regina, "an event that left an indelible mark on him, almost an interior seal of his spiritual *vocation*"[101]—that is, his *calling*, yet another acoustic phenomenon. The beauty (and the mark, the *Klangfigur*) caused by an acoustic reverberation (a *vocation*) also provides this essay with an overarching throughline connecting the ~~meta~~physical argument and the aesthetic one, as they both necessarily deal with temporality: What is exactly the time of an echo? Is it the reverberance of a past event? Is it a present event on its own? Is it a repetition and, as such, a recollection, an anamnestic phenomenon? Is this acoustic distance what allows the offense to be seen (or heard, or said) from a forgiving perspective? Is forgiveness the echo of an offense? Is it the muffling of that very same echo instead? Is the second "forgiveness" in Kierkegaard's dictum, "forgiveness **is** forgiveness," a reverberation of the first one? Is it *an acoustical illusion* instead? Are those two "forgivenesses" the resulting pattern (the *Klangfigur*) of his turning away from Regina being rubbed against his guilty ("unhappy") conscience, like the bow on the surface? Is Kierkegaard's writing (as much as his crossing over his texts) an indirect way to ask Regina for forgiveness, as if prattling and doodling the guilt away? Joakim Garff notes how Georg Brandes described Regine Olsen as being "invisibly marked": "there is something sphinxlike about her but also fascinating, even tempting. It is she who had been the object of Kierkegaard's love, and it is the weight of this historical romance that Brandes can see in her face, and what moves him to describe her as *invisibly marked.*"[102] Can we think of this invisible mark as a *Klangfigur* that reveals how these broken engagements keep on reverberating in the present? Since forgiveness requires the revisiting (the repetition) of the past offense, does it mean it amplifies a sustained reverberation? Can this distance be thought of as Romantically *sublime* and, if so, to what extent is thus forgiveness a matter of aesthetic appreciation? If Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche, understood the liminal aspect of these *Klangfiguren* as "a physical event that cannot be translated into any kind of symbolic representation"[103] (yet another communicational impossibility, another presence conveying nothing) then forgiveness (a present event that seeks to evoke, repeat, echo, or undo the past, as if muting or at least muffling it) cannot be directly present(ed) in language either—just as Regina is barely ever mentioned in any of Kierkegaard's writings, even if he considered her his single reader. Are the two forgivenesses Kierkegaard

101 Cornelio Fabro, "Why did Kierkegaard Break Up with Regina," *Orbis Literarium*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1967, p. 387, italics are mine.

102 Cf. Joakim Garff, *Kierkegaard's Muse: The Mystery of Regine Olsen*, trans. by Alastair Hannay, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013, p. xi, italics are mine.

103 Engberg-Pedersen and Simons, "Sound Figures," p. 330.

rubs against each other the forgiveness he grants Regina and the forgiveness he expects from her, *his* forgiveness being *her* forgiveness? But what is Regina's fault, if any?

Ralph Harper points out that "he who tried to become 'contemporaneous' with Christ could not believe he could become contemporaneous with Regina Olsen. Perhaps he could not, because he had so much difficulty becoming contemporaneous with a God ready to forgive even a Kierkegaard who was not ready to accept forgiveness."[104] Harper's remarks are on point, and go hand in hand with those of Fabro saying Kierkegaard's writings are "but an echo"[105] of his breaking up with Regina, *Klangfiguren* resulting from his *eminus/cominus* combat with marriage. Considering Kierkegaard was "an inveterate scribbler and doodler…his handwritings and manuscripts [being] riddled with *Krims-Krams*…sometimes… inscribed in the margins and sometimes in the midst of the text,"[106] and that each time we rewrite a text *it looks like a repentance*,[107] then approaching Kierkegaard's literature as if it were a long apology (Socratic overtones intended) is possible.

On the Concept of Irony includes two references to Chladni's *Klangfiguren.* The first one, while mainly pointing at the absence of irony in Xenophon's Socrates, also touches on the questions of noise, silence, the everlasting, and fighting, while adding one more variable that frames the argument within an aesthetic (in the Romanticist-philosophical sense of the word) perspective—i. e., monstrosity; a monstrosity that falls under the broader category of "ugliness":

> …with respect to irony, there is not one trace of it in Xenophon's Socrates. Instead, sophistry makes its appearance. But sophistry is precisely *the everlasting duel of knowledge with the phenomenon in the service of egotism, which can never terminate the duel in a decisive victory* because the phenomenon rises up again as quickly as it falls, and since only the knowledge that like a rescuing angel snatches the phenomenon from death and translates it from death to life can win, [sophistry] finally sees itself saddled with the endless hosts of phenomena. But the *Chladni figure corresponding to this monstrous polygon*, *the life's quiet interior infinity corresponding eternally to this noise and uproar*, is either the system or irony as the "infinite, absolute negativity," with the difference, of course, that the system is infinitely eloquent, irony infinitely silent.[108]

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104 Cf. Ralph Harper, "Hidden Inwardness," in *Augustine and Kierkegaard*, ed. by Kim Paffenroth, John Doody and Helene Tallon Russell, New York: Lexington Books 2017, p. 185.

105 Fabro, "Why did Kierkegaard Break Up with Regina," p. 387, italics are mine.

106 Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 308.

107 Cf. Jacques Derrida "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning God*, ed. by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001, p. 53.

108 *SKS* 1, 87 / *CI*, 26.

The second one refers to the *visibility* of what Kierkegaard deems our feebler flanks:

> It is the weaker sides of the human being more than the good sides that come close to being *Chladni figures that continually become visible when made to vibrate properly*; they seem to have an intrinsic, natural necessity, whereas the good sides, to our dismay, so often suffer from inconsistencies.[109]

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus introduces this very same acoustic image in a Socratic commentary on sin:

> If someone does the right thing, then he certainly does not sin; and if he does not do what is right, then he did not understand it, either; if he had really and truly understood it, it would quickly have prompted him to do it, *it would quickly have made him a Chladni figure for his understanding: ergo, sin is ignorance.*[110]

These references to Chladni's *Klangfiguren* constitute a background from which the question of forgiveness in Kierkegaard can be better appreciated, as they all ultimately point to the same (acoustic) question of (visible) chatter and (invisible) silence as related to sin and ugliness—Socrates being the archetypal ugly man. In his *Reflections on Kierkegaard's Socrates*, Harold Sarf writes that "Plato [eventually] contradicted his own statements in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* that the deepest things should not be said directly, let alone be committed to writing, by actually communicating in dialogues esoteric metaphysical and moral truths; whereas Kierkegaard judged that Socrates taught that truth is inwardness."[111] To my knowledge, no work published so far on classic Greek influences in Kierkegaard has provided any evidence that he actually read the *Seventh Letter*, but that is inconsequential. I consider the "forgiveness **is** forgiveness" dictum works according to an epistemological, anamnetic, dialectic procedure described in said letter, which is the same one structuring all Socratic-Platonic dialogues: "only when names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions have been *rubbed against one another* and tested," Plato writes, "pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object."[112] By rubbing the

109 *SKS* 1, 311 / *CI*, 250.
110 *SKS* 11, 221 / *SUD*, 93.
111 Cf. Harold Sarf, "Reflections on Kierkegaard's Socrates," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1983, p. 275.
112 Plato, Letter VII, 344b.

word *forgiveness* against itself, as if "the forgiveness you give" were dialoguing with "the forgiveness you receive," Kierkegaard creates an obscure metaschematical reverberation (like that of the bow rubbing the surface covered with sand that reveals the *Klangfigur*, or the Socratic dialogue revealing the participants' ignorance). It is known that Hamann metaschematically identified his writing style with Socrates', describing it as a group of islands lacking "the bridges and ferries of method necessary for their close association."[113] The obscurity of his texts, Hayes argues, "is not generally resolved by providing further information."[114] Kierkegaard's dictum purposely works the same way: it explains nothing, but its presence makes everything (indirectly) visible.

One final note on acoustics should suffice to swiftly move through the "aesthetic." I have occasionally referred to caricatures and caricaturing. Caricaturing, for Kierkegaard, is not necessarily insulting or belittling. It is rather a manifold manifestation of things that otherwise might remain in the background. Taylor asks:

> "What *can* Abraham say to Sarah?...Can he tell her what took place? What did not take place? What *almost* took place?...How can he explain that he is no longer the same, even though nothing actually took place, or perhaps *because* nothing took place—if, that is, nothing can take place, take 'its' place, his place, the son's place? How can he explain that his return is not the return of the same? If he tried, Sarah probably would break out laughing."[115]

Taylor's reference to Sarah's laughter suggests that a language unable to account for the return of not-the-same (Abraham after Moriah, but also the forgiven sinner) is, in the end, risible.[116] Kierkegaard, it is widely known, was the victim of an assault of ridicule launched by the satirico-political weekly magazine *The Corsair* [*Corsaren*]. This is not a mere biographical detail. It has been regarded as the most renowned controversy in Danish literary history, and it had profound consequences in Kierkegaard's work. His writings annoyed and irritated the Copenhagen public, which responded with *Det Københavnske Grin*—the Copenhagen laugh. Roger Poole explains how Danish humor latches on to "some physical or social failing in an individual and to submit it to endless jibes and mockery," to cut the person down to size.[117] When an individual is subjected in the national press to Danish humor (that is, to the Copenhagen laugh) then "a

113 Hamann, *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. 8.
114 Hayes, "Introduction" to *Hamann's Writings on Philosophy and Language*, p. xii.
115 Taylor, *Altarity*, pp. 305–306.
116 Taylor suggests the return of not-the-same (Abraham after Moriah, but also the forgiven sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*) can be indirectly communicated, not by *saying* but by *writing.*
117 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 40

kind of tribal revenge is taken. There is nothing for the object of it to do but to endure it."[118]

The editor of *The Corsair*, Meïr Aron Goldschmidt, described Kierkegaard as "not *really ugly*, certainly not repulsive, but with something *disharmonious*"[119]—quite the acoustic choice of words. The series of caricatures by Peter Klæstrup published in the journal showed a hunchbacked Kierkegaard with a sharp nose, tall hat, stick cane, and laughably thin legs. It is from these drawings that we get the image of Kierkegaard being conspicuously deformed, "monstrous," "ugly."[120]

The caricatures were published the very same year Thorvaldsen's *Christus* was installed in Copenhagen's *Vor Frue Kirke*—in January 1846, one year before *Works of Love* was published. For those attending the service, the contrast between Kierkegaard's caricatured, "ugly" body and that of the *Christus* ("the most perfect statue of Christ in the world")[121] could not be any sharper. Many of Kierkegaard's *Christian Discourses* were delivered from that very pulpit. These

118 Ibid.

119 John Updike, "Incommensurability," *The New Yorker*, March 2005, p. 81.

120 Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, pp. 15–16: "Kierkegaard was an ideal target for Danish humor. The literary and philosophical talent he had shown in writing his aesthetic and edifying authorships in so short a time had annoyed and irritated the Danes. They resented his repeated attacks on their insensitivity and intellectual insincerity. When the great Copenhagen public, then, was offered the caricatures of the little spindly shanked, wide-hatted figure, it was delighted. It lost no time in wreaking its revenge. Passers-by in the street would nudge each other and exchange meaningful glances. The philosopher's name, Søren, was made into a street call…According to Kierkegaard's own testimony, passers-by would stare intently at the trouser legs to decide whether they were of uneven lengths, and even come up to the philosopher to inquire whether these were, indeed, "the" trouser legs that they had seen in *The Corsair*, so that they could assure their friends they had really seen them. An entire terrorism of the street was rapidly invented and deployed, and the daily walks [Kierkegaard's] turned into a nightmare…His body was reduced to what these humorists wanted to make of it. As 1846 wore on, this war of attrition became unendurable."

121 Fanny E. Coe, Larkin Dunton (eds.), *The World and Its People*, Boston: Silver, Burdett &. Co. Publishers 1893, pp. 126–127: "Perhaps the most perfect statue that Thorwaldsen [sic] ever executed is of the Saviour. It is placed in the Church of Our Lady, which is chiefly remarkable for containing many of the works of the great sculptor. Several friezes decorate the vestibule and the entrances to the chapels. There is a most exquisite marble angel kneeling by the baptismal font. But undoubtedly the most noticeable figures are those of Christ and his disciples…Christ is represented with open arms, saying to the world 'come to me and I will give you rest.' *It is considered the most perfect statue of Christ in the world.* Thorwaldsen [sic] did the whole work himself, not entrusting any portion of it to his pupils, as was his custom. When it was finished, he was seized with despondency. "My genius is decaying," he said to his friends, "my statue of Christ is the first of my works that I have ever felt satisfied with. Till now my idea has always been far beyond what I could execute; but it is so no longer. I shall never have a great idea again."

sermons make explicit reference to the inscription, taken from Matthew's Gospel, at the base of the sculpture—*Kommer til mig*, "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."[122] As for Augustine, forgiveness is for Kierkegaard a struggle against (or *in*, or *out of*) time, but what in Augustine was an "erecting burden" is in Kierkegaard also a "beautifying" one—a beauty comparable to that of Thorvaldsen's sculpture, and to the promise of an unburdening, straightening rest. The distance separating the "ugly," restless, hunchbacked (as if burdened) Kierkegaard from the "beautiful," serene, "erecting" *Christus* (the incarnate *Ordet* preached at *Vor Frue Kirke*), is the backdrop from which I read another *dictum* found in *Works of Love* and which goes hand in hand with the "forgiveness **is** forgiveness" formula. A few paragraphs before reaching the conclusions of the book, Kierkegaard writes "the neighbor is the ugly."[123] It is in this ugliness (in this caricaturesque, quasi-monstrous, manifold manifestation of that which otherwise would not be recognized) where forgiveness needs to be born and incarnated.

122 Mt 11, 28.
123 *SKS* 9, 361 / *WL*, 373.