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The Category of the Aesthetic
Considerations on Theodor W. Adorno's Reading of Kierkegaard

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ABSTRACT. This paper proposes an investigation on Theodor W. Adorno's category of the aesthetic through an analysis of his *Kierkegaard. Construction of the aesthetic*. Published in 1933, this text shows how the development of an aesthetic theory is rooted in Adorno's philosophical reflection since its very beginning, culminating then in his posthumous masterpiece, *Aesthetic Theory*. By a careful reading of Adorno's comment on the Kierkegaardian thought, I aim to gain a deeper comprehension of his own category of the aesthetic. In particular, I will argue that by emphasising Kierkegaard's plurality of equivocations of the term "aesthetic" Adorno manifests his intention to grasp such category in a constellative way. This implies that its inner meaning cannot be fully expressed through the singularity of any of its moments, but only through their interrelation. As a consequence, the traditional reception that conceives it as immediately coinciding with the artistic sphere alone needs to be urgently revised.

1. Introduction

The following study intends to present an analysis of Theodor W. Adorno's *Kierkegaard. Construction of the aesthetic*, namely the dissertation for his *Habilitation* at the University of Frankfurt am Main, written in 1929/30 under the supervision of Paul Tillich and then published in 1933, after a radical revision. In this occasion, my purpose is neither a philological examination of the volume nor a judgement on the plausibility of Adorno's interpretation of

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Kierkegaard. On the contrary, the focus will be rather placed on the way Adorno investigates Kierkegaard's category of the aesthetic in order to gain a deeper understanding of Adorno's own conception of the aesthetic.

Since it is an early writing, actually Adorno's very first major philosophical publication, it might seem illegitimate or at least unlikely to argue that some of these early theorisations could have been valid throughout the development of his entire aesthetic thought, right until his posthumous masterpiece, *Aesthetic Theory*. And yet, it is worth noting that already Adorno's contemporaries felt that *Kierkegaard* could have been read as a significant incubator for his future philosophical insights. This is the case, for example, of Benjamin's review on the *Vossische Zeitung* (Benjamin, 1933), that explicitly underlined its anticipatory aspect with respect to Adorno's later writings. Moreover, Adorno himself must have looked always with renewed interest to his early work, as it is demonstrated by the periodic recurrences of the theme. For instance, the article *On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*, sent to Krenek and then published in 1940 in the journal "Studies in Philosophy and Social Science". Thereafter, a new edition of *Kierkegaard* followed in 1962, sent to Bloch with the designation of «dreamlike anticipation» (Müller-Doohm, 2005, p. 519), and finally in 1966 a third re-publication of the volume, the last one personally edited by Adorno. New appendices were added here, such as the essay dedicated to Tillich, *Kierkegaard noch einmal*, and the expansion of the *Notiz*. Such perseverance is explicitly echoed in Adorno's words in the foreword of the Italian edition in 1961, where he affirms that «his deep aversion to always starting a new life is also evident in his relationship with his books» (Adorno, 1983, p. 11, trans. by EV). Even more remarkable are the statements that follow few lines below: here, he openly recognises the inevitable changes and evolutions that both his thinking and his writing style have undergone since then. Nevertheless, he strongly refuses to reject this book as a mere preliminary stage. On the contrary, he believes that little in it does not deserve to be re-examined under the aspects of his later thought (Adorno, 1983, p. 11).

Last but not least, one could enhance the relevance of the *Kierkegaard* book in the development of Adorno's aesthetic theory by bringing full attention to the originality of its perspective compared to the prevailing historical-philosophical context. In this regard, it should be noted that the early 1920s witnessed the so-called *Kierkegaard-Renaissance*, a resurgence of studies that saw in Kierkegaard primarily the Father of modern existentialism, emancipating

him from the predominant religious interpretation. Now, Adorno's choice to devote himself to the Danish philosopher should not be interpreted as adherence to such intellectual current: rather the opposite is true. Adorno's different focus stands out already from the subtitle of his work, *Construction of the Aesthetic*: the most deprecated existential stage in Kierkegaard's thought becomes the privileged centre of Adorno's investigation.

Accordingly, it is my intention to show that *Kierkegaard. Construction of the Aesthetic* indeed contains significant passages suitable to support the main assumption of my argumentation: i.e., the idea that Adorno's category of the aesthetic does not let itself be limited to the artistic sphere, but conversely possesses a deeply philosophical dimension. To that end, I plan to read this early work in light of a specific sentence that Adorno wrote for the first time in the aforementioned foreword, namely: «aesthetics does not mean here [in this work], as it does not in Kierkegaard himself, only a theory of art but, in Hegelian terms, a position of thought in regard to objectivity» (Adorno, 1983, p. 12, trans. by EV). The key point that this quotation illuminates is twofold. On the one hand, it explicitly opens aesthetics to a dimension beyond art theory; on the other, it creates a clear correspondence in this particular sense between Kierkegaard's attitude towards aesthetics and Adorno's one. Showing how this Adorno's retrospective statement effectively takes shape in his early work will allow me to seize a surplus of the aesthetic beyond the artistic terrain, manifesting its strong theoretical instance. To that aim, I firstly take into consideration Adorno's method of analysing Kierkegaard's aesthetic (§2); secondly, I examine Adorno's comment on some crucial concepts in the Kierkegaardian philosophy (§3). Lastly, on grounds of all these elements, I formulate a hypothesis concerning the kind of position in regard to objectivity that aesthetics actually is (§4).

2. How to construct the aesthetic

Following Adorno's own words, the purpose of his dissertation is the construction of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's thought, that is to say, «to grasp the meaning of his category of the aesthetic» (Adorno, 1989, p. 23). Investigating the moves Adorno elaborates in this occasion could be of the utmost interest to help better understand his position too, since, as we shall see, some of those are going to become hallmarks of his later philosophical approach.

More specifically, Adorno inaugurates the volume by defining the status of the material he intends to work on, namely the exclusively philosophical nature of the Kierkegaardian *œuvre*: « the first concern of the construction of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's philosophy is to distinguish it from poetry» (Adorno, 1989, p. 5). As a matter of fact, there has always been a tendency to consider Kierkegaard's works as literary creations: in doing so, however, what is missed is nothing less than their philosophical truth content (Adorno, 1989, p. 3). In this sense, one should not confuse what Adorno admits being a fundamental convergence between philosophy and art with an identity between them. In Kierkegaard's particular case, Adorno banishes from artistic terrain his texts, which do not fulfil the necessary criteria to rise to the rank of artworks. For it is not enough to simply shape a philosophical thought through literary configurations, like Kierkegaard's writings, in order to earn the designation of art. So far, however, it remains unexplained why it is so imperative for Adorno's project to purge Kierkegaard's philosophy of all poetic ambitions. In this regard, my firm belief is that Adorno, in ascertaining the philosophical character of these texts, makes also for the aesthetic eminently philosophical claims that would otherwise be dissolved if one regarded them as artistic creations that are in their nature essentially alien to concepts.

Once attested the full philosophical citizenship of the object of his analysis, Adorno moves on by announcing a plurality of equivocations of the term 'aesthetic' in Kierkegaard. Firstly, the concept refers to the realm of art criticism; secondly, to the first of the three "stages" of existence; and thirdly, to the form of subjective communication (Adorno, 1989, pp. 14-15). Every single meaning remains distinct but at the same time related to the others. Thus, their synthesis should not be sought in abstract summations, but only through an analysis of individual phenomena. It is clear that Adorno's attitude towards the concept of the aesthetic is here already articulated in a constellative way. Such a conceptual modality indicates Adorno's sensibility in recognising the relevance of multiple and divergent meanings of the aesthetic, which is taken on in its entire complexity. Thinking the aesthetic as a constellation signifies then that none of its equivocations, considered in its singularity, can express the complete and deeper sense of this category. Hence, Adorno refuses to construct it relying exclusively on its most traditional linguistic usage, namely the doctrine of art and beauty, which is nonetheless indeed present in Kierkegaard's *œuvre*. Because of its being isolated in the entirety of his thought, Kierkegaard's art theory relates itself only fragmentarily to his dialectics, limiting the

dialectical potential of the aesthetic itself, which, on the contrary, Adorno evidently wishes to preserve.

Thereby, to the originality of the point of access in Kierkegaard's thought Adorno adds also an element of complexity in the conception of this category that makes it operative on several philosophical levels. As a matter of fact, the interpretative key he adopts goes beyond its more traditional determinations: necessary but not sufficient conditions for an effective construction of the aesthetic. In Adorno's view, the latter is not confined to its historically correlated domain, namely the artistic, just as it is not to the existential one, which is its usual reference in the secondary literature on the Danish philosopher. At a closer look, the conclusion Adorno comes to at the end of the first chapter *Exposition of the aesthetic* seems thus to fully account for the exceeding of the aesthetic beyond a theory of art. An invitation to dig deeper that cannot but resonate as a warning also towards Adorno's thought itself, especially in light of his abovementioned later claim, whose first part finds in these preliminary considerations already a concrete confirmation. Consequently, Adorno identifies the only fruitful path to pursue a real construction of the aesthetic in the investigation of the subject/object relation in the Kierkegaardian philosophy, since its category is indeed «one of knowledge» (Adorno, 1989, p. 14). Not only the Greek etymology 'aisthesis' that strongly resonates in the term 'aesthetic', but also the present mention to the gnoseological relation *par excellence* contributes to assigning a theoretical dimension to this category. Therefore, at the end of the first chapter, the task that Adorno has set himself seems far from being accomplished. Thus, it urges a continuation of the analysis within the Kierkegaardian *œuvre* in order to find the meaning of the aesthetic with and against Kierkegaard.

3. *The aesthetic as Kierkegaard's genius loci*

Adorno's intention to investigate Kierkegaard's subject/object relation, more precisely their alienation, serves as a *fil rouge* throughout the manuscript and refers directly to the experience that lies at the heart of the book itself (Adorno/Krenek, 2020, p. 50): the one of the *Verstelltheit* of the meaning, namely the human historical impossibility to access meaning again. So, it begins an extremely complex journey through the depths of Kierkegaard's thought in the name of an immanent critique *in statu nascendi* that lets Adorno proceed through Kierkegaard

beyond him. Among the early twentieth-century receptions of Kierkegaard's work in Germany, Adorno's one is the only interpretation that takes the form of critique. In this case, however, critique does not necessarily mean total dismissal (Lee, 2008, p. 6). Adorno's critical movement operates rather by considering some Kierkegaardian formulations, recognising them as having indeed a value, although opposite to their original one. In short, «the order of the spheres is inverted» (Adorno, 1989, p. 124). This indicates that Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard is not only a receptive production but also and most importantly a productive reception (Schulz, 2011, p. 29). Thus, by means of a careful reading of the most significant moments of his immanent critique, it would be legitimately possible to discern Adorno's own philosophical beliefs.

Hence, Adorno gives full attention to Kierkegaard's fundamental figure of inwardness, where the latter makes all the moments of meaning, subject and object converge. The primacy of the inwardness in the Kierkegaardian thought derives from its possibility of aspiring to access meaning again, which is conversely denied to the external world of things. Therefore, the movement that Kierkegaard undertakes is an inward movement, whereby the external world, denigrated as a mere accident, simply disappears. As a result, the dialectical dynamic in act cannot be said to be one between subject and object but between meaning and a subjectivity that has now become objectless: namely, an inner monologue of the spirit alone. Furthermore, Kierkegaard imposes the same verdict of rejection on everything that is not related to the inwardness, which first and foremost implies the aesthetic. And yet, Adorno's argumentation revolves around the attempt of showing that «the central antinomy» (Adorno, 1989, p. 66) of Kierkegaard's thought manifests itself precisely in the concept of the aesthetic. In other words, his strategy aims to penetrate «the obscure depths of a philosophy that his [Kierkegaard's] doctrine of art touches upon only in momentary shudders» (Adorno, 1989, p. 23), in order to uncover the real value of the category of the aesthetic.

As Adorno points out, all the equivocations Kierkegaard attributes to the aesthetic converge into a figurative definition, «certainly the most precise that he gave» (Adorno, 1989, p. 65), whose central core lies in the expression «my booty is images» (Adorno, 1989, p. 64), quoted also in a passage of *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno, 2002, p. 287). From this context, it is possible to infer the fundamental traits of Kierkegaard's aesthetic: briefly, those gather around the concepts of immediacy, semblance, discontinuity, contingency. In that regard, Adorno's

effort does not aim to negate such aspects of Kierkegaard's aesthetic *per se*. Conversely, he rather remarks that by pointing them out as insufficiencies, Kierkegaard identifies those which are actually the potentialities of the aesthetic. This is the reason why it is of the highest interest for my main assumption to take into account some of the moments in which Adorno's evaluative overturning appears more striking.

The first one concerns directly the key place Adorno names to construct the aesthetic, namely the subject/object relation. Particularly significant seems to be the passage where he affirms that right when Kierkegaard decides on aesthetic determinations, he comes indeed closer to the reality of the condition of his philosophy as «objectless inwardness as well as that of the alien things in front of it» (Adorno, 1989, p. 67, transl. mod.). Adorno's claim represents the exact opposite of Kierkegaard's philosophical approach. According to the latter, only the inwardness constitutes an instance of substantial reality, while everything different from it, namely the aesthetic or the external world, is labelled as mere semblance, incapable of leading to truth again. Unfortunately for Kierkegaard, such isolation that he theorizes for the inwardness is nothing but an illusion, since it is continuously challenged right by all those objective dimensions that, because of their being non-dialectically eliminated, keep pushing on the subject's apparent segregation. External history and language are just the two most evident examples of the problematic nature that Adorno ascribes to the allegedly isolated pure subjectivity. Hence, he concludes that Kierkegaard does not realise that that semblance character the aesthetic is accused of is deeply rooted also in the inwardness's abyss. Consequently, only where Kierkegaard is free from this mutilated and mutilating perspective, he is able to recognise the sterile objectlessness of the inwardness as well as to regain a firmer grip on the object itself: this occurs, *malgré lui*, precisely in his aesthetic thematizations.

Such an argumentation testifies the fact that Adorno sees in the aesthetic a relational modality between subject and object that escapes the immanent suffocation of the inwardness, affecting the whole experiential process. This brings the focus, of course, on the Kierkegaardian correspondence between the aesthetic and the moment of immediacy. As Kierkegaard recognises the historical loss of an immediate relation between subject and object, he tries to restore it in the inwardness, banishing as contingent everything that stays out of the subjectivity, the aesthetic included. However, following Adorno, what Kierkegaard thus misses is nothing less than the focal requirement of philosophical truth, namely the interpretation of

actual reality. And yet, Kierkegaard still presents a form of communication between the world of things and the objectless inwardness: this very last possibility can take place only in the *Anlaß* (occasion), whose necessary introduction, nevertheless, drives Kierkegaard to self-contradiction. The ontological meaning becomes dependent on the category of the occasion as an indispensable impulse to set in motion the dialectic of existence itself, without however being part of it. This grants thus new dignity to everything that was previously deprived of all truth: the external world and the aesthetic (Adorno, 1989, pp. 94-95). As Adorno notices, although Kierkegaard defines the latter as the sphere of mere immediacy, still he is forced to admit the presence in that same sphere of some susceptibility to mediation, i.e., the occasion. Through Adorno's comment then, it appears evident that, in his own conception, the aesthetic becomes the seat of an immediacy that is nonetheless able to transcend itself. So much so that Adorno comes to affirm that in Kierkegaard, paradoxically, «hope nowhere insists more stubbornly than in the aesthetic *Diapsalmata*» (Adorno, 1989, p. 124).

This is the second and most decisive overturning of Kierkegaard's thought, since the evocation of hope represents its undeniable crux and final prerogative of the inwardness. Nevertheless, the inner contradictions that Adorno attributes to the latter impact also on its possibility of participating anew to meaning. As a matter of fact, as we have seen right from the beginning, the figure of inwardness is meant to be the keystone of the problematic triad subject-object-meaning. And yet, conversely Adorno is convinced that where Kierkegaard sees only contingency and discontinuity, right there the truth moment of his thought dwells. In lack of a relation with its other, the Kierkegaardian subjectivity closes non-dialectically in itself, whereas the realm of the aesthetic insists on the object, which is, however, never totally graspable. From its constant retraction comes then the need for the image, which allows to glimpse in things more than they are (Adorno, 2002, p. 330). At this point, according to Adorno, Kierkegaard fails to realise that the scheme of truth, enciphered and blocked, towards which his question has always been directed, finds its most adequate correspondences in the images that constitute the inner structure of the realm of the aesthetic. Adorno identifies the most indisputable evidence of his assumption in the representation of Marie Beaumarchais' despair that silently turns into hope (Adorno, 1989, pp. 125-126). This Kierkegaardian passage carries the metaphor of a letter containing information about life's happiness. However, its pages are worn out and the handwriting barely legible, forcing the eye to toil unsuccessfully as the paper

and the text become increasingly unreadable. In the end, all that is left is tears. Following Kierkegaard, this «endless, useless reading» (Adorno, 1989, p. 126) is supposed to correspond to the aesthetic individual's reflection, doomed to failure. On the contrary, Adorno understands it as the most faithful image of hope: in the aesthetic individual's overflowing eye, the vanishing traces dialectically return as comfort and hope. That the latter must glimmer in the sign of the most absolute negativity already seems to be Adorno's essential theoretical premise. For to assert it as immediately real would let it only fall back into mythology. The very own nature of the cipher prevents any fixed and immutable reading process: it is in itself possibility and fragmentariness, to which the aesthetic is *naturaliter* predisposed. This means that Adorno perceives in the aesthetic the capacity to penetrate so deeply into the concreteness of things that it ultimately transcends it. Thereby, an aesthetic way of comportment lets "something more" appear than just the mere existing. Nonetheless, like the Kierkegaardian metaphor of the rocket (Adorno, 1989, p. 131), this manifestation lasts only an instant, and yet, it strongly attests the presence of the possible in the existing and against it.

Lastly, I would like to remark a final but no less indicative passage in Adorno's argumentation. About that, it must be pointed out that Adorno indeed recognizes that Kierkegaard has grasped the intrinsic polymorphy of the concept of the aesthetic, but his comprehension is still affected by a certain partiality. In fact, his verdict on the aesthetic sphere and his doctrine of existence does not capture all of its images. What has escaped him is first and foremost the significance his philosophy attributes to the phenomenon of the Crucified. Kierkegaard inextricably enchains the original experience of Christianity to the image of the Crucifixion, handed down from generation to generation: the only one dialectically surviving. And yet, as Adorno puts it, according to Kierkegaard's account, the figurative manifestation of the Crucifix has almost no artistic value and then it cannot be considered effectively as art. In doing so, it goes beyond the artistic domain and, nevertheless, it remains itself an image. As such, «thus it rescues the aesthetic» (Adorno, 1989, p. 133). On closer inspection, this is clearly a further confirmation of Adorno's broadening of the spectrum of the aesthetic beyond the realm of the artistic. As the effigy of Christ testifies, the aesthetic sphere does not limit its images to those derived from the Kierkegaardian doctrine of existence, nor even to art, which is only one aspect of it. Therefore, in all its moments, Adorno's reflexion really seems to insist

on showing that the potential of the aesthetic can ultimately acquire fields of action other than those strictly linked to *a priori* given themes or contents.

4. Conclusions

I would like to conclude this paper by formulating my hypothesis on what aesthetics as a position of thought in regard to objectivity actually consists of. In light of all the previous considerations, I have stressed how already in this early work the contours of the category of the aesthetic have found a rather precise outline, which will be consolidated in Adorno's later thinking. These first formulations move towards a widening of the horizon of the aesthetic beyond the mere doctrine of art, while certainly encompassing it. In that regard, Kierkegaard's theorisation of the aesthetic offers Adorno very fruitful insights. It is in the discrepancy of its various manifestations and its inability to be contained within the rigid boundaries of a monolithic and unifying category that Adorno finds the crucial significance of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic (Hale, 2002, p. 44). According to both Kierkegaard and Adorno then, the theory of art alone does not fully account for the deeper meaning of the aesthetic. As a matter of fact, we could claim that the fundamental traits of the aesthetic find in art one of their most pregnant concretisations, for sure. Nonetheless, it appears that the key to construct its category could lie somewhere else: in a very theoretical setting, to be more precise. Adorno's reference to the subject/object relation as topical place to investigate the aesthetic brings the discussion to an experiential domain. To that extent, in a context of experiential mutilation that the *Verstelltheit* of the ontological meaning well represents, Kierkegaard reacts by dismissing the aesthetic of any claim to truth, which is thus exclusive prerogative of the objectless inwardness. On the contrary, Adorno's immanent critique shows that only by proceeding aesthetically the subject is able to maintain a relation with the object. The aesthetic does not eliminate the subjective moment at all, conversely, it conserves also the objective one, though. Accordingly, their relation is articulated in a such way that the aesthetic instance is so profoundly rooted into the object's concrete materiality that it manages to exceed it, as testified by the evocation of hope. Finally, in Adorno's view, aesthetics could then be considered as that position of thought in regard to objectivity that could still consent a critical experiential process in a situation of impoverished experience.

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