Kierkegaard’s Approach to Pictorial Art, and to Specimens of Contemporary Visual Culture

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Sight and Hearing

“It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer” (SKS 2:11 / EO 1:3). This simple opening sentence of Either/Or (1843) outlines the subject of this essay: Kierkegaard’s and his various pseudonyms’ pinpointing of the essence and nature, and the limits and potentials, of the concrete image, because a picture, if anything, is the medium of “the outer”—that is, the external presentation of its subject. We shall see how the nature of the picture we are concerned with is decisive for Kierkegaard and the pseudonyms, because only academic, idealistic painting is measured by such congruence between the inner and the outer. Popular pictorial art, on the other hand, plays in a completely different register.

Before I proceed, a word of caution is in order. Kierkegaard would not be Kierkegaard if the different statements in his writings about the capacities of a picture were formulated in a straightforward manner. Sometimes the statements are dressed as agitated showdowns followed by creative appropriations of theories and pictures around him. In other places the assertions are made with animated irony and performative twists. And one cannot simply presume that Kierkegaard’s different pseudonyms are speaking for Kierkegaard himself. They present different points of view that Kierkegaard wants us to reflect upon. It is my cautious suggestion that these points of view, considered together with Kierkegaard’s own use of pictures and with the texts published under his own name, form an overall tendency in his approach to pictorial art.

The pseudonymous “editor” of Either/Or, Victor Eremita, who gathers the papers of “A” and “B” into two separate volumes which he brings to print, has no doubt about his own doubt with regard to the visible and to the claim that the “inner” is represented by the “outer”:

I myself have always been rather heretically minded on this philosophical point and therefore early in my life developed the habit
of making observations and investigations as well as possible. For guidance, I have consulted the authors whose view I shared in this respect—in brief, I have done all I could to make up for what has been left undone in the philosophical writings. Gradually, then, hearing became my most cherished sense, for just as the voice is the disclosure of inwardness incommensurable with the exterior, so the ear is the instrument that apprehends this inwardness, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated. Consequently, every time I found a contradiction between what I saw and what I heard, my doubt was confirmed and my zeal for observation increased. A priest who hears confessions is separated by a grillwork from the person making confessions; he does not see him, he only hears. As he listens, he gradually forms a picture of the other’s outward appearance corresponding to what he hears; thus he finds no contradiction. It is different, however, when one sees and hears simultaneously but sees a grillwork between oneself and the speaker. (SKS 2:11 / EO 1:3)

In other words, the starting point taken by Kierkegaard/Victor Eremita in Either/Or and its view of the aesthetic is the assumption that hearing gives us the freedom to form our own complete pictures of the inward. Sight, on the other hand, presents a contradiction between a person’s inner, hidden qualities and what appears outwardly, on the surface. Sight cannot penetrate the opaque barrier that surrounds what is internal.

Either/Or plays many variations on this theme and takes a clear position on sight and hearing. In my view, this is primarily related to the polemics of the time. The book is concerned with an excoriation of an “aesthetic” mode of existence. The first part of Either/Or is therefore assigned to the aesthetic universe of the senses, and the book thus draws a psychogram of Kierkegaard’s times with the help of the various forms of art, the senses they each appeal to, and the ideas that convey them. The various aesthetic character types in Either/Or are musical and concrete images. Music is the demonic, immediately sensual aesthete, Mozart’s Don Giovanni, who lives out his passion. Pictorial art, on the other hand, is the reflective aesthete, Johannes the Seducer or “A,” who, ghostlike, exists by parasitically observing his own passion from afar.

The Veil of Veronica—or the Beautiful Image

According to his own premises, Kierkegaard has good reason for his challenging of academic art. His aim is to challenge both the idealistic aesthetics of the time, including the idea of what I shall call the beautiful image as a mimetic picture, and the harmonized (or harmonizing) and distilled pictorial art of his time. Some of his grounds seem quite unreasonable when examined
in the context of contemporary (Danish) Naturalistic art, which holds far more than Kierkegaard is prepared to see.

Kierkegaard has by no means left us with a cohesive pictorial theory, and he is sparing with references to concrete works, pictures, and painters. He keeps his pictures close to his chest. One text, however, does focus on the beautiful. This is the essay “Silhouettes” in Either/Or. Kierkegaard research does not abound with analyses of “Silhouettes,” and a blinkered close analysis warrants a prefatory reservation. Even though assessments of pictorial art and reflection on issues of form and presentation are a recurring theme in Kierkegaard’s writings and are already exposed to variations in Either/Or, Kierkegaard’s approach to identifying the ontology of pictorial art is not based on an interest in this ontology per se. Rather, Kierkegaard is concerned with the value of art as a kind of psychogram, a schematic outline or diagram that in graphic form transmits information about psychological conditions. The academic, mimetic painting of the time is thus the bearer of everything Victor Eremita attributes to Johannes the Seducer or “A.” Don Giovanni cannot be painted. “The most abstract idea conceivable is the sensuous in its elemental originality [Genialitet]. . . . It cannot be painted, for it cannot be caught in definite contours. In its lyricism, it is a force, a wind, impatience, passion, etc., yet in such a way that it exists not in one instant but in a succession of instants, for if it existed in one instant, it could be depicted or painted” (SKS 2:64 / EO 1:56–57). Considered as a type, the aesthete is a painting. With variations, Either/Or fundamentally states the same about the nature of mimetic pictorial art. The book describes what the idealistic picture cannot do and shows how its basic characteristics buttress the aesthete’s unreal mode of existence. This image is buttressed in the second part of Either/Or by the descriptions of “A” offered by Judge William, and by his fatherly admonishments of him.

“Silhouettes” tells the story of the unrequited love of three Romantic female figures, but in my reading is primarily about different types of pictures: pictures “within,” as pictures of the imagination, and pictures “without”—the immaterial wall silhouette, painting, or graphic print, that combines form and substance, or the daguerreotype’s fixation of fleeting light. It is not obvious what “A’s” intentions are with pictorial art, and with the picture in this text, which thematizes the incongruence between the inner and the outer. Why does he speak in images when his message seems to be to point to what lies beyond the picture: the veiled darkness that avoids the picture’s drawing things into the light but denotes the essence, the enigmatic? The answer is, among other things, that this particular approach to the problem of representation and presentation allows Kierkegaard to present the pro et contra of creating a picture. What can be “pictorialized” in language? How does this relate to what the pictorializing material media can and do achieve? And how is meaning created in relation to different types of image?

The hypothesis I present is that, already in this small essay of his, “A” gives us the principal terms for reconstruction of the pictorial theory that remains
by and large unchanged throughout all Kierkegaard’s work: the picture’s relation to time, including the past (recollection), the present (presence), and the future (self-appropriation), and to the spirit, the body, existence, the self and subjectivity, and love. With this essay by “A” we move into the core of Kierkegaard’s own pictorial thought that, like a walnut, is divided into two halves over a pair of questions. One is the question of the relation between the inner and the outer and of whether the inner can be objectified in an outer, visible manifestation. The other question is that of the nature of sight. In “Silhouettes,” the question about the nature of sight is answered negatively. A grillwork is set up between the inner and the outer, as in the image of the confession box in Either/Or’s prelude, and the outer view is assigned an objectifying and reifying nature. Later in Kierkegaard’s authorship there is a meditation on how outer images become set as a series of inner images, but this does not dislodge his fundamental thesis about the incommensurability of the inner with the outer. What is added is a new view of the didactic significance of pictorial art and of the relation between form and appropriation. The picture still cannot encompass the inner but affects one’s own innermost being.

The three jilted women in “Silhouettes” are Marie Beaumarchais from Goethe’s Clavigo, Donna Elvira from Mozart’s Don Giovanni, and Margaret from Goethe’s Faust. According to Kierkegaard/“A”/Victor Eremita, the outright sorrow that first overwhelms these women can be manifested in visible shape, but this is not the case when this sorrow becomes reflective. The question is why their reflective (or reflecting) sorrow cannot be expressed within the framework of pictorial art. The argumentation follows Lessing and Hegelian sight lines. Lessing is invoked as an authority regarding the relation of pictorial art to time and space. Pictorial art is referred to as the stasis of space, and thus cannot encompass reflection and the reflective sorrow that will unfold over time.

Since the time when Lessing defined the boundaries between poetry and art in his celebrated treatise Laokoon, it no doubt may be regarded as a conclusion unanimously recognized by all estheticians that the distinction between them is that art is in the category of space, poetry in the category of time, that art depicts repose, poetry motion. For this reason, the subject for artistic portrayal must have a quiet transparency so that the interior rests in the corresponding exterior. The less this is the case, the more difficult becomes the task for the artist, until the distinction asserts itself and teaches him that this is no task for him at all.

If we apply to the relation between sorrow and joy that which has been casually stated but not developed here, it is easy to perceive that joy is far easier to depict artistically than sorrow. By no means does this deny that grief can be depicted artistically, but it certainly does
say that there comes a point where it is essential to posit a contrast between the interior and the exterior, which makes a depiction of it impossible for art. (*SKS* 2:167 / *EO* 1:169)

The point is that the beautiful image, whose existence for Lessing is justified by this externalization of the inner, loses any legitimacy from a Kierkegaardian perspective. On the other hand, Hegel’s image-less contemporary horizon, in which inwardness is unfolded so that it breaches the bounds of pictorial art and can only be expressed as a concept, is an unspoken premise. In what follows, I shall consider seven key appropriations by Kierkegaard of pictorial art and other images transmitted to him by the history of images and the popular traditions surrounding them. These appropriations show Kierkegaard’s mastery of displacement of meaning and his modification of pictures and attest to the vital role played by actual visual material in his authorship.

**First Appropriation: The “Acheiropoieta” Tradition**

The point when presentation becomes impossible lies in the precise interface between the immediate and the reflective sorrow. The immediate sorrow may still be “a subject for artistic portrayal” (*SKS* 2:170 / *EO* 1:172). It is, namely, “the immediate imprint and expression of the sorrow’s impression, which, just like the picture Veronica preserved on her linen cloth, is perfectly congruous, and sorrow’s sacred lettering is stamped on the exterior, beautiful and clear and legible to all” (*SKS* 2:170 / *EO* 1:172). This image, which in reality is a depiction of the beautiful image, is my key to “Silhouettes.” It encompasses the text’s polemical matter and the ideas of the beautiful image that it at one and the same time presents and undermines.

The image of the veil takes its significance from the idealistic idea of beautiful pictorial art, which as a symbol seamlessly binds together the inner and the outer. Depiction is the outer imprint of the inner. If one wants to poke fun at the aesthetics of beauty, the image of the Veil of Veronica is well chosen. As an acheiropoieton, or an icon “made without hand,” Veronica’s Veil, or *sudarium* (handkerchief or sweat cloth), literally bears a sweaty impression of the inner—namely, the suffering of Christ. Like the inner, the sweat flows out into the outer cloth (canvas). We can take this even further. In Latin, “to sweat” or “transpire” is *trans(s)pirere*, from *trans* (through) and *spirare* (breath) or *spiritus* (spirit). In Kierkegaard’s time, this word was used as a polite, genteel expression for perspiration, but it is not too much to imagine that Kierkegaard’s pen also held the association of “inspiring” in the sense of “giving spirit to.” Thus the (canvas) cloth literally absorbs the spirit. The image of Veronica’s Veil can be seen as a metaphor of how, in one of the expressions of the time, beautiful art “makes the idea transparent.”
The image of Veronica’s Veil also serves to comment on another of the theoretical artistic ideas of Kierkegaard’s time, which is related to the contemporary interpretation of the concept of mimesis. The mimetic representation “resembles” the outer, it was believed, just as the image on the veil bears a “likeness” of Christ. Furthermore, it also bears his image or impression. This perception of beautiful, mimetic art was accompanied by the belief in the ability of the mimetic representation to make the imprint present (or present-like) or proximate. The traces of sweat on the veil clearly tell us that “he was here.” Yet they also seem to say “here he is.” The faith in the ability of the picture to create nearness quickly becomes a sense of the picture “being alive.” This was an idea that occupied many people in Kierkegaard’s time and is also reflected in the popularity of the Pygmalion theme.

This is a quite innocent example from “A’s” image bank. Yet “A” adds irony in two ways. By using this particular picture as a depiction of the beautiful image, “A” draws the aesthetic of beauty into the sphere of magic and superstition. The early Church said of this image that it was *acheiropoietos*, that is, created miraculously, and not by a human painter. On the other hand, he assigns the painting to the sphere of the Resurrection. The image of Veronica’s Veil transcends death, since Jesus is (literally) resurrected before our eyes.

Yet Kierkegaard is double-tongued. One tongue formulates itself with an uncritical presentation of the Veil of Veronica in a symbolic-aesthetic Hegelian vocabulary, where visual art is viewed in the light of eternally objective ideas. In this presentation, what makes a picture art is that it is beautiful, and it is beautiful only if it is a reflection of spirituality. The other tongue, however, hisses lowly and ironically that this criterion can probably be fulfilled only by Veronica’s magical veil, which the Catholics have purportedly preserved.

“The Interior’s Good-bye”

Let us continue our reading of “Silhouettes.” While the immediate grief thus moves outward, like blood flowing to the skin (or the sweat flowing out into the cloth and becoming a reverse impression of the beautiful image), the reflective sorrow flows inward, like blood fleeing from the surface: “The exterior pallor is, as it were, the interior’s good-bye, and thought and imagination hurry after the fugitive, which hides in the secret recesses. . . . This sorrow cannot be depicted artistically, for the interior and the exterior are out of balance, and thus it does not lie within spatial categories” (*SKS* 2:167–68 / *EO* 1:169–70).

This sorrow is in conflict with Lessing’s demarcations: “In yet another respect it cannot be depicted artistically, for it does not have inner stillness but is constantly in motion” (*SKS* 2:168 / *EO* 1:170). The experience of the reflective sorrow and what nourishes it is that it constantly seeks its object
and is therefore changing continuously. If one did nonetheless seek to make an artistic representation of this sorrow, which “is never really present but is continually in the process of becoming” (SKS 2:170 / EO 1:172), and therefore—to repeat the phrase from “A’s” comments on Lessing—“in the category of time,” this would be in conflict with what Lessing, according to “A,” has said so wisely about the forces and limits of the individual medium. If we, with Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, assumed that the outer could actually reflect the inner and maintain the inner in each of its movements, “then there would have to be a whole series of pictures in order to portray reflective sorrow; but no particular picture would express the sorrow, and no particular picture would have real artistic value, since it would be not beautiful, but true” (SKS 2:175 / EO 1:178).

This is an ambiguous passage that makes sense only if we interpret the text’s use of the concept of truth in conjunction with a scientific concept of congruence. On this basis, it can also be understood why the daguerreotype, that newly developed photographic method of Kierkegaard’s time, is placed outside the sphere of art. The daguerreotype captures the play of light on the surface, but does not capture the spirit.

The Picture’s Sensual Moment

“Silhouettes” provides a critique of both the pictorial and the romantic. Marie, Elvira, and Margaret are convinced that their love will last forever and that they will love their beloveds, and be loved by them, for all eternity. This awareness of eternity ennobles their love. In reality, the text tells us, they are captured by the illusions of romantic love. According to Kierkegaard’s “A,” this shows the three women’s fate. They do not see that their love has only the “empty” time of the sensual moment at its disposal.

What connects romantic love or sensual, fleeting love with the picture’s moment? They are of the same kin, so that the picture, which stops time in an eternal moment, can encapsulate sensual, or romantic, love. In Kierkegaard’s description of “A” and of Johannes the Seducer, the aesthete who cultivates the senses is apparent. He is also aware of the moment, but in his sensual moments disregards the eternal—that is, the truly eternal. He is not warm-blooded but bloodless and heartless, and his sensuality and sensual moments are “mediate” and completely subject to his manipulative reflectiveness. Besides much else, “A”/ Johannes the Seducer and the painting share in common that they are both reflected sensuality without spirit.

This is an important point and part of the explanation for why “A”/ Johannes must appear as a picture and not as a sculpture or orchestrated score (like Don Juan). Whether it is a flat painting or a “spatial surface,” a concrete picture is always an abstraction. It depicts a three-dimensional world in two dimensions. When an academic painting is, furthermore, as in Kierkegaard’s time, arranged in a mathematically based perspective structure,
the abstraction merely becomes more condensed. Painting, as Kierkegaard knew it—despite his many reductions—is a good image for a reflective treatment of intuition’s sensual material.

When Kierkegaard grafts his perception of romantic love with consideration of the essence and nature of painting or picture, he is, without explicitly saying so, further embroidering Pliny, who, in his *Natural History*, relates the myth of Butades and how painting is born from love. The beloved of Butades has to leave, and to preserve his memory she carves out his silhouette, or profile, in a rock. Kierkegaard comments indirectly on this narrative when he shows, with “A,” how the picture replaces reality. It points to the absent and represents what is (soon) to be lost. Image formation is thus fundamentally nostalgic by nature, and “A,” like Butades, is already lost in recollections in the present’s image-forming moment. However, Pliny’s hidden role is not thereby exhausted. “A”/Kierkegaard apparently perceives pictorial art as an art of the blind. Butades carves out an image without at the same time being able to see her model, and “A” blindly overlooks his women’s own nature with his reflective *skiagraphs*. Kierkegaard’s view of the marriage of the sensual moment, love, recollection, and image is negative. The qualities that his Danish times draw out from Pliny in order to elevate art as a child of love are used by “A” to tarnish and denigrate art. He, in fact, seems to say that image formation is nurtured by, and nurtures, a life without love.

William’s “On Time”

Let us pursue this trail, still with the relation between love, time, and image creation as our wrench. The aesthete “A” is a picture, but he is also a picture of the unloving and an active practitioner of the illusion-building of romantic love. With “B,” or rather Judge William, the perspective and perception of time change. The line of sight is the ethical aspect or, in brief, the relation between the general and the individual.

Two questions are now to be pursued. First, how does William’s perception of time and his view of marital love affect his view of pictures, whether they be paintings, graphics, or daguerreotypes? Second, why does he present his ethics as a critique of the pictorial? I shall add an image that highlights Kierkegaard’s pictorial theory.

In 1843, Kierkegaard wrote in some notes that the first part of *Either/Or* continually gets stranded on time: “This is why the second part strongly affirms it, since it is shown in the first discussion that the esthetic is broken upon time, and in the second discussion it is shown that the meaning of finitude and temporality, is to be able to become history, to gain a history” (*Pap. IV A 213*, n.d. 1843 / *JP* 1:907).

It is also the question of time, and of the relation between inner and outer time, that leads the judge to think of marriage. He draws a clear distinction between what is interchangeably called first love, erotic and sensual
Kierkegaard’s Approach to Pictorial Art

(or romantic) love, and marital love. The first, erotic and sensual love is the momentary (SKS 3:30 / EO 2:21), and its “‘mine’ . . . resonates . . . in the eternity of the seductive moment . . . in the illusory eternity of imagination and idea” (SKS 3:64 / EO 2:58). It has an abstract nature, never has inner substance, nor has “the law of motion in itself” (SKS 3:99 / EO 2:96). Marital love, on the other hand, “has the possibility of an inner history and is as different from first love as the historical is from the unhistorical” (SKS 3:97 / EO 2:94). Marital love “always moves inward” (SKS 3:138 / EO 2:139) and spends itself (in the good sense) in time. The inner history, the marital history, is thus hidden. This love is realized in life, as it is lived. The outer, on the other hand, which is the romantic or sensual love, can be manifested, but only as “dead,” visible signs.

As a consequence, marital love cannot be depicted in the “beautiful picture,” while the romantic, sensual, and erotic love allows itself to be “admirably” depicted in the picture’s moment (SKS 3:134 / EO 2:135). But an aesthetic representation always requires “a concentration in the moment [Moment]” (SKS 3:132 / EO 2:133). Both art and poetry “concentrate the extensive in the intensive” (SKS 3:132 / EO 2:133), but marital love is nurtured by the protraction of time and the continuity of creation. For marital love, the passage of time, the road, is the same as the goal (SKS 3:132–33 / EO 2:133). The truth of marital love is “the temporal sequence” (SKS 3:135 / EO 2:136). The relation of art to time, and to time’s extent, which excludes pictorial presentations not only of marital love but also of humility and endurance, is a perfect match for William’s ethical mission.

For William, pictorial art serves only to pass or to kill time, not for determining choice, which occurs in time. Pictorial art thus lies outside the sphere of the ethical, just as “A” does. Ethics are dependent upon choice and on the extended, forward-looking time of repeated actions. In other words, William’s pictorial critique is not at all concerned with pictorial art and its limitations but is merely another way of saying to “A” that, because of his pictoriality, he has no ethics. Under the surface simmers the same Romantic critique as expressed by “A.”

Second Appropriation: Ferdinand Piloty’s Kiss

Judge William stands by his viewpoints with surprising tenacity. In what is putatively his own monologue, “Some Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections. By a Married Man,” in Kierkegaard’s Stages on Life’s Way (1845), he reverts to the question of the relation between pictorial art, the love that—like the romantic—never develops, and marital love.

William’s starting point is a picture of Romeo and Juliet, “an eternal picture” (SKS 6:156 / SLW 167; figure 2). “The eternal element in the picture is that it portrays a pair of lovers and portrays them in an essential expression”
Ragni Linnet

Her gaze at Romeo is filled with heavenly bliss, “but Romeo stops this look and with a kiss all the longing of erotic love is set at rest forever, for the reflection of eternity surrounds the moment with a halo, and no more than Romeo and Juliet does anyone who looks at the picture think that there will be a next moment, even if it were only to repeat the sacred seal of the kiss” (SKS 6:157 / SLW 168). The picture of Romeo and Juliet is thus “an eternal picture” as its tableau depicts an eternal moment that can never change. Yet it is also an eternal picture because it is timeless and depicts a universal ideal that transcends history: “Do not ask the lovers, for they do not hear your voice, but out in the world ask in what century this happened, in what country, at what time of the day, at what hour it was—no one replies, for it is an eternal picture” (SKS 6:157 / SLW 168). This pair of lovers is “an eternal subject for art” (SKS 6:157 / SLW 168).

This is not a married couple—and, strangely enough, the picture fades for William when he projects it into the context of marital love. The picture begins to work and move; she is “in the admiration of love” sinking in admiration at her lover’s feet (and we see her sinking movement before

Figure 2. Romeo and Juliet’s Farewell Kiss, lithograph by Ferdinand Piloty, from William Shakespeare, *Romeo und Julia*, trans. [to German] August Wilhelm von Schlegel (Berlin: G. Grote, 1875), facing p. 75.
us), but she sinks not only before him, the visible, “but before the invisible” (SKS 6:157 / SLW 168), and now his strong arm grasps her (and we “see” how it is extended to grasp her), and together they are held up by a kiss: “This is no picture, there is no repose in the artistic situation, for as one looks at her almost sinking in adoration, one sees beyond this interrupted posture the necessity of a new one, that she stands upright at his side. One has intimations of a new prototype, the authentic prototype of marriage, because married people are contiguous angles on the same base. What is it that produces that incompleteness in the first picture, what is being sought in this faltering—it is the equality of resolution; it is the higher immediacy of the religious” (SKS 6:157 / SLW 168–69, my emphases). With the introduction of movement and incompleteness, William’s view of the ethical, which previously framed the image reflection, is now obviously drawn into the picture. Yet the married couple is thereby also drawn out of the picture’s world.

**Shadow(image)s in the Realm of Death— or Mimesis as Negative Existential**

Let us pursue this line of inquiry. When Kierkegaard’s fictitious characters make explicit the connection between image and death, the disjunction of inner and outer in the materialized image becomes even clearer, as does also the indissoluble alliance of inwardness with time. Like the picture, the corpse-like “A” has no inner. The soul has departed, and there is only a de-ontologized outer shell left. This world of shells is “A’s” world—that is, the world to which he wants to take his readers in “Silhouettes.”

“Just as Charon took people across from the fullness of life to the shadowy land of the underworld” (SKS 1:277 / CI 236), so has “A” shipped both himself and those he addresses in “Silhouettes” to a shadow world. “A” addresses the co-deceased, the Συμπαρανεκρόμενοι (Symparanekromenoi, Fellowship of the Dead), and the silhouette appears if not in the realm of death, then on its threshold.

Kierkegaard’s (and “A’s” and Johannes’s) use of the shadow as a metaphor of the picture is virtuosic. The shadow is bloodless, in contrast to reality’s beating pulse, and belongs to a world of dreams. It is a phantom. A shadow is a sham, without flesh or a chest that moves with each breath. As Kierkegaard puts it in *Works of Love*, “The shadow is weak in comparison with the strong actuality” (SKS 9:108 / WL 104). It is merely a monochrome, diffuse reflection, stripped of any individualizing features. But the shadow is also without substance and firmness. It takes flight when you reach out for it, and slips between your fingers. A shadow cannot contain an interior element because it has nothing “inside.” The shadow is pure surface. Like a mirror without depth, “a shadow” is “a reflection, a simile [in a double sense], an image [*et Bilde*]” (SKS 5:105 / EUD 100).
Kierkegaard’s connection of the picture with death is already hinted at with “A’s” picture of Veronica’s Veil. A veil is also the cloth that the Jews used to cover the face of a corpse to absorb bodily emissions. This idea is also apparent from this passage in Either/Or’s little interlude, “The Unhappiest One.” “A” speaks to his co-deceased about Niobe:

Is this an actual person or is it an image; is it a living person who is dying or a dead person who is living—it is Niobe. She lost everything all at once; she lost that to which she gave life; she lost that which gave life to her! Look up at her, dear Συμπαρανεκρόμενοι; she is standing only a little higher than the world, like a monument on a burial mound. But no hope beckons her, no future motivates her, no prospect tempts her, no hope perturbs her—hopeless she stands, turned to stone in recollection. . . . The world changes, but she knows no change, and time comes, but for her there is no future time. (SKS 2:220 / EO 1:227)

The picture is “like a dead person that is alive.”

Chemical Shadow Pictures

Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms use daguerreotypes to epitomize the absurdity of the idealistic claims of a congruence of inner and outer, inwardness and outwardness, in the beautiful picture. In the essay “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,” Judge William, or “B,” blames “A” for turning everything into shadow pictures (SKS 3:20 / EO 2:10) and, in the same voice, complains about “A’s” fascination with daguerreotypes. “A” collects daguerreotypes and is a master of both the “study of the lighting” and “magic formulas” (SKS 3:20 / EO 2:10). He puts these shadow pictures in his pockets, so he has them within reach when he wishes to enjoy visible evidence of his conquests.

A Daguerreotype: The Sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen

At that time, daguerreotypes, which had already come to Denmark in 1840, were connected with superstition and Satanism. The creation of a daguerreotype involves the use of mercury fumes and sodium hyposulfite, and the actual process by which the photograph was created on an iodized silver plate, or an iodized copper plate faced with a thin layer of silver, evoked associations with the alchemist’s bubbling, steaming workshop. It was also feared that this perceived devilry could steal one’s soul. The camera obscura “took” one’s shadow (in the double sense of taking and stealing), and popular superstition maintained that the dead did not cast a shadow. While today we are photographed, at that time people were “drawn off.” The origins of this expression may lie in an idea from Balzac (1799–1850). He believed that the human
body consisted of several transparent layers that were successively drawn off by the camera with each new exposure. Finally, there was a risk of becoming as transparent as a ghost and, like a ghost, being left without a soul.

The camera had the evil eye, like a person who brings bad luck (Italian: *jettatore*), and could cast a spell (Latin: *fascinum*). When Bertel Thorvaldsen, who was certainly not “uneducated,” was photographed in the Charlottenborg Gardens in 1844, he found it necessary to ward off Satan in the apparatus with a hand movement (the “sign of the horns”), literally to stab out its/his evil eyes (figure 3).

From the outset, the relationship between life and death in the photograph was disquieting. The daguerreotype, as the relation between the picture’s frozen time and the exposure time (which “B” in *Either/Or II*’s 1843 universe determines to be half a minute; SKS 3:17 / EO 2:7), points to a human-made opportunity to freeze time. However, when time stops, our time also stops, and we die. While a living person may appear dead in his or her picture, the dead picture’s depiction of a person who may now be deceased appears to be alive. The photograph, or *thanatograph* (literally a written account, or, in this case, a photograph of a dead person), blurs the border between living and dead, the dead and the living.
In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard uses the picture, painting, and daguerreotype to describe something else that bears the same characteristics: a life of insignificance, “a lifelike death,” emptied of life’s inner fluids, without spirit, passion, or intensity, as a superficial life, or the aesthete’s “life.” But he also creates another relation, which is between image formation and the demonic.

*The Mirror’s Image-Forming View*

While “A” and the portrait he gives of himself in his papers mainly focus on the relation between inner image and outer image, this focus is somewhat displaced by the introduction of Johannes the Seducer in “The Seducer’s Diary.” Johannes creatively examines the equation formulated by Plato of mimetic image and mirror. The question of inner and outer still resides in the background, but it is the outward aspect that is developed. The point seems to be to present some samples of (faulty) image forming through the deployment of the metaphor of the mirror. Johannes the mirror and image former plays out Plato’s ideographic rules but gives them a Romantic twist. He is but a blank mirroring surface, and his image is as devoid of existence as he himself is.

In “Silhouettes,” “A” presents his fictive female images from contemporary European culture. Johannes, on the other hand, draws the picture closer, in behind the ramparts of Copenhagen. Johannes creates pictures of everything and everyone and forms them in his own image. Moreover, being a shadow himself, Johannes also describes himself as a picture. On one of the last pages of “The Seducer’s Diary” we see him hurrying to the last meeting with Cordelia, “my work [mit Værk]” (SKS 2:431 / EO 1:445), as he confidently and delightedly calls her. Cordelia is his work. And he himself? Like his picture (Cordelia), he is himself a metaphor (Billede). “Everything is a metaphor [Billede]; I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this tryst? Who I am is irrelevant; everything finite and temporal is forgotten; only the eternal remains, the power of erotic love, its longing, its bliss” (SKS 2:431 / EO 1:444). The only love that the metaphor (Billede) Johannes knows is rooted in the illusory, metaphorical eternity of imagination and dissemblance.

In book 6 of the *Republic*, Plato describes the picture and the mirror as one and the same thing. Johannes the Seducer further develops this union. One of his potential victims is reflected in the mirror: “There is a mirror on the opposite wall; she is not contemplating it, but the mirror is contemplating her. How faithfully it has caught her image [Billede], like a humble slave who shows his devotion by his faithfulness” (SKS 2:305 / EO 1:315). Yet it is an unhappy mirror, which surely dares to frame her but not to embrace her, “which assuredly can grasp her image [Billede] but not her” (SKS 2:305 / EO 1:315). An unhappy mirror, “which cannot secretly hide her image in itself, hide it from the whole world, but can only disclose it to others. . . . And yet
are there not many people who are like that, who possess nothing except at the moment when they are showing it to others, who merely grasp the surface, not the essence, lose everything when this is going to show itself, just as this mirror would lose her image if she were to disclose her heart to it by a single breath” (SKS 2:305–6 / EO 1:315). Nor does this mirror manage to grasp the essence of existence: the inner element, the heart.

Johannes's mirror is a remarkable, “living” mirror. The mirror thinks. But “what torture if a human being were fashioned that way” (SKS 2:305 / EO 1:315). It is chilling to note that this is exactly what Johannes, the reflective seducer, is. Otherwise, the mirror is just as mirrors are. It is the nature of a mirror to remain on the surface, in visuality. The living object it mirrors, which has weight and mass before the mirror, is reflected as a “dead” surface, as a mirror image. It can grasp, but not embrace. This is a very precise description of Johannes the Seducer, since he is not actually interested in his women qua actual women. Cordelia, for example, is not fascinating as Cordelia, but only as the image he creates of her for himself.

Third Appropriation: Theseus and Ariadne

Let me provide a very tangible example of Johannes's image-forming view. In a letter to Cordelia, the hunting trophy in “The Seducer's Diary,” he describes “a painting from ancient times” (SKS 2:391 / EO 1:403) of Ariadne and Theseus, but only to create immediately his own very different image (“my picture,” he writes), which better communicates his message. Kierkegaard had probably not seen “the painting from ancient times.” However, in P. F. A. Nitsch's Neues mythologisches Wörterbuch (1821, New Mythological Dictionary), he could find a description of two different wall paintings from Herculaneum (figures 4 and 5), which he took the liberty to combine into one.

Here is his “own” painting: “Imagine this picture; imagine it slightly changed. Cupid is not weeping and his bow is not unstrung, or would you then have become less beautiful, less triumphant, because I had gone out of my mind” (SKS 2:391 / EO 1:404, my emphasis). Note how Johannes undergoes an imperceptible metamorphosis and takes on Theseus's pictorial form. “Cupid smiles and draws the bow. Nemesis does not stand idle at your side; she, too, draws her bow” (SKS 2:391 / EO 1:404, my emphasis). And observe how Cordelia becomes Ariadne’s image:

In that old painting, we see on the ship a manly figure busy at his work. Presumably it is Theseus. Not so in my picture. He is standing in the stern; he is looking back longingly. He is stretching out his arms; he has repented of it or, more correctly, his madness has left him, but the ship is carrying him away. Cupid and Nemesis both aim,
an arrow flies from each bow, they accurately hit the mark; we see and we understand that both have hit one spot in his heart to symbolize that his love was the nemesis that avenged. (SKS 2:391–92 / EO 1:404)

Johannes is like the painter who in reality takes residence in the world he himself has created.

What we have just considered is an example of how Johannes the aesthete weaves himself, Cordelia, and his readers into a cobweb that transforms reality into intuitions and (outer) perception into (inner) fantasy. Apparently this exercise in the art of describing the psychological profile of fictional characters indirectly and via their image-forming powers and propensities led to a search for pictures in which you cannot reside. Kierkegaard, master of style, through his pseudonyms, looked for pictures with formal characteristics that would cast out the beholder and turn the relationship between picture and beholder, outer and inner, upside down. To my mind he asked himself how the image-forming of the individual might be turned into a vehicle for authentic living. Let us begin with Anti-Climacus’s description of the patterns of physical and mental movement evoked by an academic painting of the 1840s.
The Visual Culture’s Popular Images: Performativity and Temporality

In *Practice in Christianity* (1850), Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus claims that the observer is subsumed when he or she observes one of the perspective-based paintings of the academic type:

But “to observe” can mean in one sense to come very close to something, namely, to what one wishes to observe; in another sense, it signifies keeping very distant, infinitely distant, that is, personally. When one shows a painting to a person and asks him to observe it... he steps very close to the object... in short, he comes as close to the object as possible, but in this very same movement he in another sense leaves himself entirely, goes away from himself, forgets himself, and nothing reminds him of himself, since it is he, after all, who is observing the painting and the cloth and not the painting and the cloth that are observing him. In other words, by observing I go into the object (I become objective) but I leave myself or go away from myself (I cease to be subjective). (SKS 12:227–28 / PC 233–34; see figure 6)
With these words, Anti-Climacus’s starting point is the image matrices available in his time and the expectations people have of them. These paintings are assessed according to whether “they are a good likeness,” purify, and point upward. This pictorial universe has two roots. One is the perception of the experience of art as a disinterested pleasure. The other root is the contemporary metaphysics of presence, with the belief in the presence of the universal in the beautiful image. In relation to Danish fine arts in the 1830s and 1840s, which were governed by a striving for harmony, idealization, the “nature-like,” good craftsmanship, perspective theory, and Goethe’s color theory, Kierkegaard seems to wish to be at odds. It seems that his pictorial aesthetic can be reduced to a “not.” Instead of harmony, for example, Either/Or’s “A” points to the paradox. Instead of idealization, he opts for reality; instead of “nature-like” verisimilitude, abstraction; the sketch replaces “good craftsmanship”; two-dimensionality, or a reverse perspective whereby the picture falls outward to the viewer, replaces the classical linear perspective; and the holistic Goethean palette is replaced with glaring, “striking” colors (“light green in yellow,” “yellow-green,” and so forth; compare, for example, the description of these in Either/Or’s prefatory “Diapsalmata”; SKS 2:31 / EO 1:23). Kierkegaard, through “A” and some of the other pseudonyms, seems to find his alternative to Danish fine arts in contemporary folk art, whether it be the time’s one-sheet prints, including the “Neuruppiner Bilderbogen” or “Nürnbergs,” or as he finds it in the petit journalism of the time.

Whereas academic pictorial art tends to invite a wrongly directed bodily and mental movement outward, that is, into the picture, along the pathway already painted for the viewer to follow, Kierkegaard (through his pseudonyms) attempts to reverse this wrong movement, so that it correctly points inward—that is, toward the self. Other picture types create an inverse movement whereby the half-completed picture is pushed back into the body of the observer and, enfolded in time, is completed by his or her inner, active eye. These pictures function as midwives for the observer. We find them inscribed in different elements of the works: folk-like, nonmimetic, and nonperspectivist pictorial impressions that schematize and abstract and leave it to us, the viewers, to add body to the image; trick pictures whose middle space and empty, unworked areas play a vital role; fragments, an uncompletable form, which in the picture’s world are embodied as, for example, sketches or studies of fragmented details; outline drawings; and finally a permanent, provisional image expression, such as the arabesque. All of these pictorial types share a focus on how the original picture is received and on the supplementary pictures it generates—that is, the acquisition process.

In Repetition, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Constantin Constantius compares one of his time’s cheap, template-painted, exaggerated, and very popular prints with an academic landscape—he does not name one in particular—that functions “as a true copy” or by “ideal reproduction.” The example
serves to show us how we are affected by the final, complete, and finished form and the incomplete attempt.

Fourth Appropriation: Raphael’s The Entombment

At times we see the more mature individuality who satiates himself on the strong food of actuality and is not really influenced by a well-executed painting. But he can be stirred by a Nürnberg print, a picture of the kind found on the market not long ago. There one sees a landscape depicting a rural area in general. This abstraction cannot be artistically executed. Therefore the whole thing is achieved by contrast, namely, by an accidental concretion. And yet I ask everyone if from such a landscape he does not get the impression of a rural area in general, and if this category has not stayed with him from childhood. In the days of childhood, we had such enormous categories that they now almost make us dizzy, we clipped out of a piece of paper a man and a woman who were man and woman in general in a more rigorous sense than Adam and Eve were. A landscape artist, whether he strives for effect by faithful representation or by ideal reproduction, perhaps leaves the individual cold, whereas a print like that produces an indescribable effect, since we do not know whether to laugh or to cry, and the whole effect depends upon the observer’s mood. (SKS 4:33 / R 158)

I am unaware of any extant Nürnberg print of “a landscape depicting a rural area in general.”¹⁴ The closest I have come, so far, to Kierkegaard’s example is The Entombment from 1847, a mirror image copied from a German Nürnberg original, inspired by Raphael (figure 7). Note the template-like landscape in the background, where it is left to us, the observers, and our imagination, to create a landscape that we can see, feel, and smell. There are numerous references to Nürnberg prints in Kierkegaard’s writings, where, in accordance with the custom of the time, the word is used as a general designation of the German woodcuts, copperplate prints, and lithographs that increasingly flooded into the Danish market in the first half of the 1800s and dominated it from around 1840. These German prints originally came from, and hence were named after, Neuruppin and Nürnberg. Their most striking aspect is the colors, which children found appealing. Sometimes, the pictures are in reverse perspective, so that the figures step out of the surface instead of moving into the picture. The picture-signs, or those elements in the pictures that are rendered as abstractions, sometimes resembling pictographs, were easily replaceable. It was only necessary to cut the block a little (if it was a woodcut, as in this case), replace the poplars with a beech or pine tree, and voilà, a new location and new images would appear. The structural lines are rough and the paint appears to be slapped on and seems almost too bright.
The lack of shadowing contributes to flattening everything in this picture. There is no rounding—that is, no synesthetic dimension—to grasp and no space to enter. But also the relationship between image and imaged is uncertain and left to us to determine.

The connoisseur’s appraising gaze, which admiringly absorbs the perfectly completed landscape painting, leaves the connoisseur cold. However, in the view of another of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, the Nürnberg print of “a landscape depicting a rural area in general” will “turn the observer’s gaze inward into himself” (SKS 7:328 / CUP 1:359), so that it is possible for the observer to “thrust him[self] away” (SKS 7:328 / CUP 1:359) and continue to work on the half-finished or unfinished “images.” With this pictorial approach, Kierkegaard in many ways anticipates what is today the common approach, which focuses on art’s performative or performing dimension. The German art critic Dorothea von Hantelmann’s poststructuralist and very inclusive definition of the concept is relevant to our purpose:

**Figure 7.** Laterally reversed copy of a German lithograph probably printed in Nürnberg ca. 1830. The original source is Raphael, *The Entombment*, woodcut, 1507. Printed in Denmark by Th. Petersen, ca. 1847. V. E. Clausen, Copenhagen.
Kierkegaard’s Approach to Pictorial Art

The notion of performativity, as I relate to it, centers around the possibilities and limits of productivity—the ability to produce a meaning, to provide an experience or to create a situation. We all know, for example, the meaning of a door: you enter or leave a room through it. But asking about the performativity of this door points to the situation it produces, which might be integrative, segregative or exclusive. Or towards the actions that can take place with or through this door, like slamming it and thereby performing a certain culturally coded convention of arguing. So, in a nutshell, performativity leads us towards a situational understanding of culture, to a situational aesthetics.

In art history, performativity theorists focus on the “in-between” between the observer and the object of analysis, where both the work’s significance and the observer’s subjectivity are created. Despite all differences, it is such a middle space and such a “situational aesthetic” that Kierkegaard projects in his alternative to the beautiful image.

Irony in Art as a Controlled Element versus Socratic or Romantic Irony

In his Master of Arts dissertation, The Concept of Irony (1841), Kierkegaard distinguishes between Romantic and controlled irony. He reminds us several times that K. W. F. Solger, one of the standard-bearers of German Romanticism, in his Vorlesungen über Aesthetik (1829, Lectures on Aesthetics) and Nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel (1826, Posthumous Writings and Correspondence), describes how any artistic creation must be ironic if it is to be art: “It has already been pointed out in the foregoing that in his lectures on esthetics Solger makes irony the condition for every artistic work” (SKS 1:325 / CI 324). Kierkegaard does not refer to Solger as an example to be followed; quite the contrary. For Kierkegaard, Romantic irony is both speculative and metaphysical.

Unfortunately, Solger does not distinguish between the individual art forms. One can ask oneself how an “irony” painting or picture from the 1840s, when Naturalism dominated, would look. Are we referring to the way the painting or picture interprets its subject or to a figure that reflects upon its own form? I choose the latter option, as does Kierkegaard.

Let us take The Concept of Irony in reverse order and begin where Kierkegaard ends, the section in which he describes irony as a controlled element and the truth of irony. The irony described here is the irony that we should strive for. For Kierkegaard, irony is about our approach to actuality, but thereby also to ourselves. As a controlled element, irony “limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency” (SKS 1:355 / CI 326). Irony as a controlled element is also “a guide” (SKS 1:355 / CI 327) and “the way” (SKS
1:356 / CI 327), a “way” that leads to “actuality” (SKS 1:354 / CI 325). As such, irony is closely related to doubt, for the way shown by irony is not “the way whereby someone fancying himself to have the achievement comes to possess it, but the way along which the achievement deserts him” (SKS 1:356 / CI 327–28). The actuality Kierkegaard describes is the historical actuality of existence, where time is lived and people are born and die. Irony as a controlled element makes people human (SKS 1:357 / CI 329), as it teaches us “to actualize actuality” (SKS 1:356 / CI 328). When irony constitutes a controlled element, it does not cause either the ironic or actuality to be carried away.

Fifth Appropriation: Napoleon Haunting His Grave

*The Concept of Irony*, which among other things seeks to describe the difference between Plato’s and Socrates’s uses of irony, is concerned with the contrast between the inner and the outer, being (or noumenon, in Kant’s sense of the term) and phenomenon. For Kierkegaard, furthermore, irony is determined as absolute negativity and, it can be said, “scoops out the kernel” (SKS 1:106 / CI 45). The model for Kierkegaard’s “controlled irony” is Socratic irony. This is not surprising since Socrates plays a central role in all of Kierkegaard’s literary works and in his perception of the nature of philosophy. A deeper understanding of Socratic irony, as Kierkegaard reads it, can be gained from familiarity with the trick picture he apparently had before him as he wrote. Socratic irony is like the picture’s “Napoleon” (the empty space between the trees; see figure 8), where “nothing” becomes almost visible” (SKS 1:113 / CI 52), a negative picture:

The more Socrates tunneled under existence [Existentsen], the more deeply and inevitably each single remark had to gravitate toward an ironic totality, a spiritual condition that was infinitely bottomless, invisible, and indivisible. . . . Allow me to illustrate what I mean by a picture [Billede]. There is a work that represents Napoleon’s grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with an almost alarming necessity. So also with Socrates’ rejoinders. One hears his words in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees. There is not one single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important. (SKS 1:80–81 / CI 19)
The trick picture gives us an understanding not only of Kierkegaard’s perception of Socratic irony, which reappears, reworked, in his diagnosis of controlled irony, but also of the manifestation of the relation between the dialogue partners that the controlled irony takes as its premise: co-acting, co-creating, producing, and, in brief, performing. If we transplant the traits and abilities of the trick picture, and the perception of the reception process that determines its design, there appears to be a relation between Kierkegaard’s opting for the popular pictorial culture and the controlled irony.

**Romantic Irony—or a Controlled Ironic Approach to a Painting Loved by Romanticism**

Kierkegaard more than hints at the relation between mimetic pictorial art and Romantic irony through an association he draws while working on his dissertation’s section on Plato. Unexpectedly, he suddenly draws a copperplate into his discussion. With exquisite irony, he alludes to copperplate
etchings in conjunction with a critique of Friedrich Ast’s book *Platon’s Leben und Schriften* (1816, *Plato’s Life and Writings*), in which Ast argues that Socrates’s defense is written neither by Plato nor by Socrates himself, but by someone unknown. Kierkegaard finds Ast’s viewpoint absurd and—(Romantically) ironic.

### Sixth Appropriation: Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*

This concerns a description of a presumably colored reproduction of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* from 1512–14 (figure 9), one of the most popular icons of Kierkegaard’s time, reproduced, described, and copied over and over by artists both at home and abroad. The passage reads, “There is an etching of the ascension of the Madonna. In order to raise heaven as high as possible, there is drawn across the bottom a dark line, over which two angels peek up at her. Similarly, by quoting Ast’s words in the text, I shall elevate his words
as high as possible, and in order to heighten his pathos even more, I shall draw a line over which at times irony’s roguish face will be allowed to peek” (SKS 1:146 / CI 90). The irony in relation to Ast is obvious in terms of the use of the etching and the repetition of the word “high” and images of height. Kierkegaard will “elevate his [Ast’s] words” as high as possible and in order to “heighten his pathos,” and so forth. It is also obvious when he turns the angels into “irony’s roguish face.” Kierkegaard’s treatment of the picture is, to put it diplomatically, quite unimpressed and creative.

The picture presents not the Madonna’s ascension but her appearance among us mortals. It would also be quite unfortunate if she were to rise to heaven with the Christ child before he could become an adult and a main protagonist in the New Testament. The painting is of the Madonna with child, and the two saints, Sixtus and Barbara. The figures stand on a bed of clouds and are framed by heavy curtains that are each pulled aside. Mary is descending from the heavenly skies and seems to continue her progress out of the picture, to enter the “actual” space in which the painting is hanging. This effect is due to the painting’s focal point, Mary’s left knee, which is bent as if she is walking. The attention of St. Sixtus and St. Barbara is on the faithful, who we imagine are standing in front of the balustrade raised at the lower edge of the picture. The two cherubs who are resting their arms on the balustrade are “within” or behind it, and thus in the picture’s imaginary space, which is in fine harmony with their nature. There, they appear now as angels and now as cupids—that is, as creatures on the cusp between immanence and transcendence. The tiara placed on the top of the balustrade functions as a visual and symbolic link between the “actual” Church of Rome and the imaginary, transcendent space.

Kierkegaard seems at play here, like a street urchin, and it seems unlikely that he imagined he was faced with a heavenly ascension. His use of this picture almost besmirches its iconic status and Christian significance. Even though Kierkegaard was not a great scholar of the classical art history tradition, this pictorial interpretation is governed by a (controlled) ironic view.

Postscript

One of the small aphorisms that introduces Either/Or and gives us a first taste of “A’s” psychological profile reads, “My life achievement amounts to nothing at all, a mood, a single color. My achievement resembles the painting by that artist who was supposed to paint the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea and to that end painted the entire wall red and explained that the Israelites had walked across and that the Egyptians were drowned” (SKS 2:37 / EO 1:28). Many have sought to identify the picture for this diapsalma, which is based on Exodus 14:21–31, but the solution is clear. According to the record of the auctioneer who sold his library, Kierkegaard owned a copy
A prank by Owlglass is related, that is almost too witty for him. Owlglass pretended to be a painter, and offered his services to some monks who wished to have a wall painted in one of the rooms of their monastery. They bargained with him about this, and required him to paint the Red Sea that the Children of Israel crossed with dry feet, while the Pharaoh and all of his army were drowned. Owlglass took on this task, and got to work straight away, simply by covering the entire wall with red paint. After completing the work in less than half a day, he came to demand his payment. When the monks saw the work, they were not pleased, and the Father Superior complained that one could not see the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, and asked why they were omitted. “There is a good reason for that,” said Owlglass: “They have already crossed to the other side, so you
cannot see them.” “But where are the Pharaoh and his riders?” asked the monks. “You cannot see them,” the painter replied, “because they are on the bottom of the sea.” 17

If we juxtapose the diapsalma with this version of one of Owlglass’s pranks, we get a picture of “A”/Johannes!

**Seventh Appropriation: Owlglass’s Owl and Mirror**

Owlglass is often depicted with an owl in one hand and a mirror in the other, which is a literal visualization of his name (in High German, Eulenspiegel). Kierkegaard may have known of editions of the book in which the prankster Eulenspiegel is seen with owl and mirror in his hands (figure 10; Strassburg edition 1515, reprinted in 1885). He may have just played with the name. At any rate, “A” and Johannes the Seducer are incarnations of both images. The reflective “A”/Johannes is the owl and the constantly image-forming “A”/Johannes is the mimetic mirror.

**Notes**

1. Elsewhere in his authorship, including the works published under his own name, there is reflection on sight and the interconnectedness of the Christian message and the way we look at our neighbor and at ourselves (compare Christ’s all-embracing look in *Works of Love*) and on its liberating potential to create new opportunity (compare, e.g., *The Concept of Anxiety*).


3. The myth was resuscitated around 1800 by the Romantics in Northern Europe and Denmark. Two paintings might illustrate this. In 1811 C. W. Eckersberg painted *Malerkunstens fødsel* (*The Birth of Painting*). The painting is reproduced in Kasper Monrad and Peter Michael Hornung, C. W. Eckersberg: *Dansk malerkunsts fader* (C. W. Eckersberg: The Father of Danish Pictorial Art) (Copenhagen: Palle Fogtdal, 2005), 92. Around 1830, Heinrich Eddelien completed his painting *Malerkunstens oprindelse* (*The Origin of Painting*), Statens...
Museum for Kunst (National Gallery of Denmark), Copenhagen. The painting is reproduced in Mogens Nykjær, Kundskabens billeder: Motiver i dansk kunst fra Eckersberg til Hammershoi (Images of Knowledge: Subjects in Danish Art from Eckersberg to Hammershøi) (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1991), 123, fig. 64. I am implying not that Kierkegaard knew these paintings but rather that the myth was part and parcel of the horizon of the Romantics and their critics.


5. It is very hard to say which picture this actually concerns. There are countless depictions of Romeo and Juliet (paintings, graphics, book illustrations, theater posters, pictures celebrating illustrious actors and actresses playing the loving couple, bilderbogen, etc.). A review of the (German) works of Shakespeare owned by Kierkegaard (see ASKB) has not yielded any result. The work catalogued as ASKB 1882, namely, Vierzig Kunstblätter zu Shakespeare’s dramatischen Werken (in Stahl grawirt) (Forty Art Sheets to Shakespeare’s Dramatic Works [Engraved in Steel]) (Stuttgart, 1840), which does not register anywhere, must be Nachträge zu Shakespeares Werken von Schlegel und Tieck: mit 40 Stahlstichen zu Shakespeares Werken (Postscript to Shakespeare’s Works by Schlegel and Tieck: With Forty Engravings to Shakespeare’s Works), 4 vols., ed. Ernst Ortlepp (Stuttgart: L. J. Rieger, 1840). The only scene from Romeo and Juliet depicted in the Nachträge is the one that takes place in the burial vault, represented in outline. It has been suggested by some (e.g., Howard and Edna Hong) that the lithograph Kierkegaard refers to is Ferdinand Piloty’s (1786–1844) The Kiss; see SLW 703n129. The Hongs mention the picture without source and do not reproduce it. Fortunately, Eric Ziolkowski has followed up on their suggestion and referred me to his book The Literary Kierkegaard (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011), where he reproduces The Kiss as the frontispiece. It was originally reproduced in Shakespeare’s Romeo und Julia (Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet), ed. A. W. Schlegel (Berlin: G. Grote 1875), facing p. 75 (new edition 1889, facing p. 75). We have no knowledge of how this picture circulated in Kierkegaard’s lifetime. He might have encountered it in Copenhagen or Berlin—or he might not. Although it must be a conjecture that Kierkegaard is writing about exactly this picture, it perfectly fits his description and helps us understand how Kierkegaard enlivens and freezes his pictures because, to paraphrase Goethe, he looks with a touching eye and a seeing hand; see J. W. Goethe, Römische Elegien (Roman Elegies) (1788; Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1980), 6:93.

6. Kierkegaard is not alone in associating the picture with death. The family resemblance is also apparent from Blanchot, for example, and in a way that, notwithstanding all the differences, resembles Kierkegaard’s. For Blanchot the comparison serves to “de-ontologize” the picture; see Maurice Blanchot, “Les deux versions de l’imaginaire,” in L’Espace littéraire (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 345–59; “The Two Versions of the Imaginary,” in The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 254–63.

7. The commentary in SKS K3:245 also states that in 1842 there were two “photo” studios in Copenhagen: the Austrian portrait painter Joseph Weninger’s
Kierkegaard’s Approach to Pictorial Art

in Bredgade and M. Alstrup’s in a pavilion in Kongens Have. At the opening of Tivoli in 1844, one more studio was established. About this and the Bertel Thorvaldsen daguerreotype portrait, see, e.g., Marie Louise Berner, Bertel Thorvaldsen: A Daguerreotype Portrait from 1840 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Press, 2005).


10. The parallels between Kierkegaard’s “making Regine an image,” as shown by the correspondence retained from the engagement period, and “A”/Johannes the Seducer are a trail I cannot pursue here.


12. Kierkegaard’s indisputable fascination with children’s and folk art’s predilection for the bright unmixed primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—might also be one of his many ways to get at Hegel. In his Aesthetics, Hegel writes about the choice of colors among “barbarians”: “Barbarians in general take their pleasure in simple and vivid colours like red and blue etc.” G. W. F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, 3 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 3:85; A 2:851. For Hegel, to bring forth the shimmer (das Schein) of live spirituality, the colors need to be mixed either on the palette or by using glazed colors that fuse with the refraction of light. As Hegel sees it, the use of primary colors symbolizes a bygone stage in the history of art and is a thing of the barbaric past.

13. Quite remarkably, we see how pictorial artists are concerned with folk art and its bright, glaring colors (often primary colors: blue, red, and yellow); with its resemblance to the synthesizing, flattened, and simplified expression of a child’s
drawing (how large is the most important, no matter how large in reality); and with the eye folk art has for materiality and texture—that is, for the visual and tactile rather than the intellectual. See Meyer Schapiro, “Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté,” in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), 47–85. In Denmark, a professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, C. W. Eckersberg, in a popular engraved sheet, chooses a loud yellow to fill out a scene before a lottery booth. See Monrad and Hornung, *C. W. Eckersberg* (n. 3 above).

14. See also the essay by Martijn Boven in the present volume, where this same Nürnberg print is discussed as an example of kitsch.—Ed.

15. Quoted by Camilla Jalving, *Værk som handling: Performativitet, kunst og metode* (The Work of Art as Action: Performativity, Art and Method) (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, 2011), 54. (See also the discussion of Kierkegaard and performativity in Boven’s essay in this volume.—Ed.)

16. Cf. *ASKB* 1469. The sales record does not identify any publisher or publishing house but does state that the book was probably published between 1812 and 1842. The work is known in about twenty editions from the nineteenth century, of which a number are from the first half of the century. It is thus not possible to state which edition Kierkegaard used.