

by Roger Poole

Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, submitted at the University of Copenhagen in 1841 for the degree of Magister Artium, has at last appeared in English translation.¹ Not before time. It is the last of his major works to reach the English speaking public, and certainly the one without which all the rest of Kierkegaard's work is in danger of being misunderstood. It is interesting to note that 1841 is the year when Marx took his doctorate at Jena. Marx has been accorded every kind of critical attention, but Kierkegaard, discovered late, is still emerging into his full importance. Last summer Gallimard of Paris issued *Kierkegaard vivant*. Comprising papers read at a recent U.N.E.S.C.O. conference by such figures as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel etc, it forms an eloquent proof that the thought of Kierkegaard is being revalued by those very thinkers who 'discovered' him thirty years ago. Collins, in publishing *The Concept of Irony*, adds one further work of 'the living Kierkegaard' to their previous excellent output in the field.

Lee Capel has rendered us great service in letting us have at last his polished and erudite translation. It has taken a long time, at least six years in the correcting. The difficulties of this work are famous. Now the work is available to anyone who, while interested in the enigmatic thought of Kierkegaard, has not a ready command of a fluent and punning Danish.

The Concept of Irony deserves to be well-known, hailed, read and enjoyed. Rarely can such a witty, good-humoured, mature, intelligent and ferociously yea-saying work have appeared as an academic dissertation. Defended at the public oral examination for nearly eight hours, it puzzled all the examiners. Indeed, from a stylistic point of view, it was considered as outrageous. Was the thesis a vigorous disproof of the Hegelian philosophy, or was this perhaps the work of the most intelligent Hegelian yet to bring his thought to the light of day? Kierkegaard's real position seemed a mystery, and it remains so today.

Kierkegaard's position on what he took irony to be is ambiguous. We must understand one thing, as Lee Capel points out excellently in his Introduction (p.36): there are no less than three different kinds of irony in question. There is the irony which has 'its inception

¹*The Concept of Irony*, by Søren Kierkegaard. Translated by Lee M. Capel, Collins, 1966, pp. 442, 42/-

in the figure of Socrates'. There is another irony, studied in Part Two of the dissertation, which has 'its illusory zenith in the romantics'. Finally in the closing pages, there is 'the point at which irony enigmatically disappears, experientially metamorphosed through resignation into self-mastery'.

The first irony is the well-known Socratic one, studied in Part One with copious reference to the Greek, not only however to the dialogues of Plato, but also to Xenophon and to Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* where the figure of Socrates is submitted to sharp but evidently intelligent criticism. Here Kierkegaard is at home, in his search for the historical Socrates, scattering Greek on all sides, availing himself of Schleiermacher's schematism of the Platonic dialogues, and belabouring Hegel on the grounds of unscholarly superficiality.

But there is another irony to be studied, the so-called 'Romantic irony'. Unfortunately for the unwary reader, this kind of irony is studied not only theoretically but also in terms of Kierkegaard's own text. Kierkegaard uses Romantic irony to refute Romantic irony. Hence the difficulties in coming to a clear decision as to his own position on the matter. Academics are notoriously literal, and in submitting this dissertation to them, Kierkegaard shows the unkindness of genius. From the first he loathed the 'Privat Dozent' and lecturers generally. So he submitted his ironic dissertation to them, knowing full well that his ultimate audience would not be academic, and also that any reading of this work which allows itself to slip into academicism will immediately founder. This was perceived by his examiners, all of whom, contrary to accepted critical opinion, were fully awake to Kierkegaard's intention.

What is Romantic irony? In the English speaking world the subject seems to have fallen out of sight and out of mind. It is difficult to reconstruct what Kierkegaard's contemporaries took it to be. Hegel detested it, and criticises it, in a manner quite unlike him, both virulently and rudely, (cf. *Lectures on Aesthetics*). Kierkegaard likewise launches into the attack.

One of the most accessible definitions is perhaps that of Solger, who had himself developed the philosophical aspects of irony at length: 'True irony arises from the view that so long as man lives in this present world, it is only in this world that he can fulfil his 'appointed task' no matter how elevated a sense we give to this expression. Any hope we may have of transcending finite ends is foolish and empty conceit. Even the highest is existent for our conduct only in a shape that is limited and finite'. Friedrich Schlegel, another of the Romantic ironists, gives a definition, which has since become famous, of the phenomenon, in his *Lyceum Fragment* No. 108. Solger, the brothers Schlegel, Tieck, perhaps Jean Paul Richter were the most distinguished exponents of this aesthetic irony which balks at the apparently insoluble contradiction between the limitless freedom of the human spirit and the little world which hems us in.

It is usually stated that this irony was a direct result of Fichte's philosophy. This belief was evidently held by Kierkegaard as well, because he entitles a large section of his Part Two: *Irony after Fichte*. In what way was the ironic aesthetic necessitated by the Fichtean philosophy? This is obscure, and the standard histories of literature and the standard philosophical dictionaries do little to help. Fichte's reformulation of Kant's philosophy, however, seems to posit consciousness as hovering over an insoluble contradiction. The terms used to express this contradiction vary, but it is the contradiction which matters. Even art is helpless to heal or assuage this contradiction between the facticity of things, and the supremacy of the all-constituting 'Ich'. Hence the idiosyncratic novels of Jean Paul Richter, the bizarre fairy-tales of Tieck, hence the flippant non-commitment of Schlegel's *Lucinde*. The unconditioned longings of man, his supreme Kantian/Fichtean 'practical' self, are in conflict with the infinite smallness of the everyday.

Understood in this light, Romantic irony is a very human and charming attempt to overcome the sadness or frustration in the thought that we are not (*pace* Fichte) the creators of our world in any significant sense. This irony descends to Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, to his *Felix Krull*, to his incredible characters on *The Magic Mountain*. Locked in eternal dispute with the world, they inhabit it with only half of themselves.

Where then did Kierkegaard stand in this matter? He follows the sadness and the frustration perfectly. What he detests is a kind of moral relativity which it necessarily brings in its wake, a free-floating non-commitment, which he found perfectly expressed in Schlegel's *Lucinde*, a quasi-pornographic novel which had immense popularity at the time, though now obviously superseded in its genre. Kierkegaard writes: '*Lucinde* seeks to abrogate all ethics, not simply in the sense of custom and usage, but that ethical totality which is the validity of mind, *the dominion of the spirit over the flesh*. Hence it corresponds fully to what we have previously designated as the special pursuit of irony: to cancel all actuality and set in its place an actuality that is no actuality' (Capel's translation, p.306. For some reason Capel does not italicise the words '*the dominion of the spirit over the flesh*' which Kierkegaard has italicised in the Danish, and which obviously form the kernel of his whole objection to the Romantic irony).

From his hatred of this non-commitment in ethics (a hatred which was to receive further ironic treatment only two years later in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard deduces that the Romantic irony is pernicious both as a philosophy and as an aesthetic. Here he seems to follow Hegel's reasoning. The core of the objection of both philosophers seems to be a kind of Protestant hatred of the morally imprecise and undefined.

Much of the 'aesthetic' authorship which we are to have from

Kierkegaard's pen after 1841 is however cast into one or other form favoured by the Romantic ironists: novelle, diary, notebook maxims, essays on aesthetics, lyrical prose passages incorporating semi-heroic or semi-mythical figures in romantic chiaroscuro, all these we are to find in profusion. Yet Kierkegaard, in using the forms of the Romantic ironists will still be mocking them. Hence it is important to understand the status of irony as Kierkegaard sees it before he embarks on this ironic authorship: and hence the importance of *The Concept of Irony* of 1841. The difficulties of seeing how theory and practice fit together are really formidable. A study on this matter seems necessary, and Lee Capel's translation admirably prepares the way for such a study.

One of the merits of Lee Capel's *Introduction* and his *Notes* is that they raise in a new and sensitive form the old problem of Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel. Lee Capel seems to attribute to Kierkegaard a much greater degree of actual book-learning in Hegel than is justified. It is true that Kierkegaard knew, owned, and quotes profusely from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. It is likewise true that there are some close references, but only a few, both from the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. What is not so sure is that Kierkegaard had a very sufficient grip on the *Logics*, though one could deduce that he knew the lesser *Logic* rather better than the greater. Lee Capel's suggestions that he was intimate with these works, like his suggestions that Kierkegaard had a much earlier acquaintance with the *Lectures on Aesthetics* and the *Phenomenology of Mind* than is generally admitted (see *Introduction*, p. 30 and *Notes*, p. 359 and p. 360) seems to be the result rather of a sensitive hopefulness, a 'reading-into' the text what ought to be there for the Kierkegaard passage to make sense, than based upon any part of the 1841 text.

Curiously enough, this often works. Lee Capel has that kind of sensitiveness to what is going on *behind* the text, which makes these references to the *Logics* and to the *Phenomenology of Mind* a tantalising pleasure rather than an academic servitude. Hegel also very often gains in comprehensibility from this kind of backward glance. Kierkegaard's thought (for example on the whole status of 'the negative' in philosophy) is also more clear when one credits him with an extensive technical knowledge of Hegel's *Logic* as Lee Capel does, even if one suspects that Kierkegaard's reading in this work was rhapsodic and inspired, and possibly also fairly brief.

Finally, where does *The Concept of Irony* stand in the total plan of the authorship? Certainly it is the Alpha of the immense edifice and, as an ironic stance, may well also represent the Omega. Even in his late works, Kierkegaard does not renounce Socrates as ironist, only rejects the Socratic theory of knowledge as inadequate because it lacks the consciousness of sin. (This is the position in 1847-8, for instance, in *The Sickness Unto Death*.) The Socratic irony remains

with Kierkegaard all his life, even in the most exalted moments of his Christian assertions, even very often in the brilliant journalism of the articles in *The Fatherland* and *The Instant* of 1854-5. In attacking the worldliness of the Danish established church and its representatives, he always maintains his Socratic detachment, and irritates like the Socratic gad-fly, in order to drive home the meaning of his attack.

The Concept of Irony is also the origin of the 'indirect communication' itself.² In the early authorship, form imitates content. Later, the content will have to correspond to the form (existential 'reduplication'). By contrasting the literary modes of his day, the fashionable Romantic irony, both with the Socratic negativity and with what he calls in his final pages *Irony as a Mastered Moment. The Truth of Irony*, Kierkegaard gives us a blueprint of the production which is to come and the way in which it should, as a literary structure, be regarded. 'Kierkegaard regards irony', writes Lee Capel on p. 35, 'as *the mere beginning of subjectivity*, and assigns to it the value of marking the birth of the personal life'. The rest of Kierkegaard's authorship is to pose in many and various forms the same question: how may one achieve the personal life?, and we may therefore see that in *The Concept of Irony* the whole of the future Kierkegaardian literature is implied and projected.

²cf. Roger Poole, *Indirect Communication*. New Blackfriars, July 1966.