"Constructive Destruction" as response to suffering

Prolegomena to a "concept" of Salutary Disaster
On the crossroad of Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion and Literature

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis develops the idea of "constructive destruction" in close readings of selected texts by Søren Kierkegaard, Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem and Philip Roth.

1. The focus on the study is on "suffering" and "constructive destruction" in the "modern" period, which means that "suffering" is being understood primarily as internal (respectively) existential suffering.

2. Kierkegaard's "The Sickness unto Death" is a typical example of this very kind of suffering. Kierkegaard's theoretical treatise of suffering in this writing is problematic, though I argue that a close inspection of his literary strategy of pseudonymity allows for a more positive evaluation of his contribution.

3. The reading of Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard introduces the idea of constructive destruction, for Adorno has attempted to wring the positive out of the collapse of Kierkegaard's "system."

4. Kafka's aphorisms are the source of the term "constructive destruction." They were written in a time of severe crisis, and they develop this idea particularly in reflections about the im/possibility of dying. Kafka's work was related to philosophical and religious ideas of constructive destruction by Maurice Blanchot and, more extensively, by Gershom Scholem: Scholem sees Kafka's work as a (in his times) contemporary form of heretical Kabbalah, for which Sabbatianisms is a prime example; Sabbatianism, again, enacts constructive destruction.

5. Philip Roth's novel "Sabbath's Theatre" may or may not play with the name of founder of this Jewish sect. Either way it can be read as a contemporary reflection of the logic of constructive destruction as response to suffering.

6. My selection of texts and my method of reading are unconventional but not random. The method is located at the crossroad of philosophy of religion and literature and inspired by what I call differential analogy. The result of my reading is not a recipe for the overcoming of suffering; rather, I provide models for meaningful responses to suffering that can inspire our perceptions of the conflicts that we may (quite likely) face in one way or another.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction

Life entails suffering – now and then, to say the least. The following essay on suffering does not claim that life is always and at every instance suffering. And yet if it is the case that suffering does make its appearance in human lives now and then, then human beings need orientation about how to deal with suffering in a sensible and ultimately promising way.

The present study is not about suffering "as such", if there is such a thing. I do not know what is going on inside of the "head" that is, in the central nervous system, of somebody who suffers from pain. Neurophysiology does have means to explore the neurological processes that are triggered by experiences of *pain*, and these could be tantamount to suffering, but the present study is not informed by neurophysiology. It may be felt that the reflection about suffering is meaningless and completely inappropriate, because suffering must be ended and that is all there is to say about it. And yet people do reflect and talk about suffering. The present study is dedicated to those who are confronted with their own or with other persons' reflections about suffering. To be confronted with an ongoing reflection about suffering necessitates a response, one way or the other. Of course we can say that the reflection is inevitably inapt with respect to the immediate experience of suffering. But if we do so, than we let those who respond to suffering with reflection fall back into the isolation whence their words have made a journey out into the open.[1]

Expressed in terms of semiotics, the present study is not about the referent of the signifier /suffering/. The referent of the signifier /suffering/, again, could only be a subject of medical science. Neither, in contrast, is this study primarily concerned with the signifier /suffering/[2]. I do offer an analysis of the function of the signifier /suffering/ in Kierkegaard's work[3], but this exploration has a heuristic function. Its aim is to make us sensitive to fundamental problems that may be related to the use of that term. The primary concern of the following work, in contrast, is the signified "suffering", i.e., the cultural construct that is associated with that term, or the ideas and concepts that could appear under the heading "suffering".[4]

The signified "suffering" has a broad extension. In what follows, I will concentrate on particularly "modern" conceptualisations of suffering, which means,

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[1] *En passant* I would like to mention that "suffering" could be a test for our confidence in communication as such: if we do not trust our – admittedly inapt – discourses about the ineffable experience of suffering, then this may be an occasion to ask what we actually do expect from our communication.

[2] In semiotics, signifiers are often printed in slashes (/).

[3] See p. 15ff.

[4] The "signified" is often confused with the "referent". I am using the terminology offered by Ferdinand de Saussure.

suffering with respect to interiority, or existential suffering.[5] "Modernity" is intended to refer to a historical condition in which the subject becomes aware of itself and reflects upon itself. I am aware that this definition is disputable, but I do think that authors like Kierkegaard and Kafka, who appear to express "our" modern condition pointedly, do support such an understanding of "modernity."

Against the backdrop of these deliberations, I would like to explain the title of the thesis. The word "response" emphasises that I am not dealing with suffering as such but with cultural responses to suffering. "Constructive destruction", a phrase borrowed from Kafka, will prove to be a promising response to suffering. Constructive destruction plainly means that a process that at first sight appears to be (solely) destructive is effectively heading in a constructive direction. I call my study "Prolegomena" because it forms the first step of a more extensive project that I have commenced, i.e., a *comprehensive* account for the overcoming of suffering featuring this very notion of "constructive destruction". The word "concept" is printed in quotation marks because it is obviously inadequate, for disaster eludes conceptualisation. I use this word nonetheless in order to communicate that this work has a theoretical and constructive aim; it is not merely a reconstruction of that which others have said about this theme. "Salutary Disaster" is of course an oxymoron. The configuration of these terms parallels the phrase "constructive destruction", though it is supposed to indicate that I am not concerned with a theoretical antinomy, but rather with the lives of human beings.

The present study simultaneously belongs to philosophy, the philosophy of religion and literary studies. The eventual outcome of this overall project will offer a reinterpretation of theorems that are traditionally dealt with within the study of theology. I do not know whether the ideas that I present are themselves already theological, or whether they are merely potentially inspiring for theology. When I say "I do not know", I mean that I am suspended in between mutually *exclusive* ideas of what "theology" is. Some of these emphasise the distinctiveness of theology and of its axioms, others emphasise that theology is interwoven into "other" disciplines. Before I can articulate the implications of my preliminary ideas for a "genuinely" theological reflection of suffering[6], I would need to have settled these questions.

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[5] "Existential" suffering, again, is distinct from immediate physical pain respectively suffering in so far as immediate physical suffering is neither reflexive nor discursive. – My concern is not with suffering that is caused by external circumstances, which would require for a different (political and ethical) kind of study. And yet that kind of study, again, could be related to "genuinely" theological themes such as "lamentation". See Soelle (1973), 94 et. al.

[6] On Suffering in theology, see Gerstenberger / Schrage (1977); Oelmüller (1986).

1.1. A short refutation of the embrace of suffering

A few comments will be made about the kind of response to suffering that I will deliberately *exclude* from this essay. I am referring to the medieval idea of sacred pain or blessed suffering, which can be found e.g. in Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross, but also in contemporary works. Meister Eckhart's *The Book of Divine Consolations* and St. John of the Cross's *The Living Flame of Love* teach us a lot about how suffering was viewed at their time. Both of these texts, in spite of their diverseness, share fundamental traits: Suffering will have been good. By destroying the ties of the self to the fallen world, suffering opens and purifies. Rather than reviewing these works in their entirety, I will look at one particular metaphor that could suffice to express why the following essay will aim to take a different route from these two writers.

Meister Eckhart likens suffering to a fire which consumes those parts of the human being that are unlike God. He describes how a log, if it is put into the fire, spits and rebels against the fire as long as it is unlike it; as soon as the log becomes like the fire, the labor *(my phrase)* ends.

When the fire acts, igniting the wood and setting it ablaze, then the fire reduces the wood to something small, quite unlike itself, removing from it its bulk, coldness, mass and moistness, and making the wood more and more like itself. And yet neither the fire nor the wood is satisfied or contented with any warmth, heat or likeness until the fire has given birth to itself in the wood and has conveyed to it its own nature and its own being so that all becomes a single fire, equally one, without distinction and knowing neither increase nor decrease. And this is why, until the process is complete, there is always smoke, crackling and contention between the fire and the wood. But when all the differences between them have been removed, the fire is still and the wood is silent.[7]

The fire, then, burns off the difference between God and man; it destroys that which gives rise to suffering, thus enacting what one could call a "salutary negativity". According to Meister Eckhart, suffering is like a fire that is required to make the human being like God, which would be a state where suffering will be conquered for good.

St. John of the Cross, in spite of living three centuries after Meister Eckhart and differing from him in many respects, reveals comparable views about the function of suffering. In his "The Living Flame of Love", he even refers to this very same metaphor:

Now with the light and heat of the divine fire, it sees and feels those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided within it, hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire being applied to it made it sweat and smoke and sputter. And this is what the flame does to the imperfect soul.[8]

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[7] Meister Eckhart (1994), 72.
[8] St. John of the Cross (1964), 587.

This portrayal of the meaning of suffering in Meister Eckhart's and in St. John of the Cross's works is powerful yet brutal. One could argue that the metaphor of fire is rather dangerous.[9] But even in spite of this problem, I would argue that these conceptualisations are particularly hard to communicate in our times.

The point that both Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross are trying to make is that the journey towards God may lead through suffering, which means, though, that there is a positive aspect in the negative experience that will eventually prevail. This means that formally speaking, the transformation of the negative into the positive, which is the undercurrent of the metaphor of salutary fire, would need to be spelled out in terms that are communicable in our times.[10] This may be a very strong challenge, for we experience our world in quite a different way from the mystics. The mystics "knew" that suffering is a symptom of "a sickness that is not unto death", respectively a sickness that will, thus St. John of the Cross, lead *through* death to the glory of God.

> The first step of love makes the soul sick in an advantageous way. [...] Yet this sickness is not unto death but for the glory of the Lord [Jn. 11:6][11], because in this sickness the soul's languor pertains to sin and things that are not God.[12]

In this respect, mysticism relies on transcendental assumptions about the source and destiny of life that are no longer self-evident to us.[13] The sickness remains, but in a critical age, it worsens and becomes a "Sickness that is unto Death", or rather, a

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[9] I will name one recent example to flesh out this claim: In his inauguration speech for his second term of office, George Bush said: "By our efforts we have lit a fire as well; a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power. It burns those who fight its progress. And one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world." (Bush 2005) The synopsis of a recent example of a kind of demagogic rhetoric should alert us. The similarity is uncomfortable: For George Bush, the fire of "freedom" (as defined by US-American world politics) is beneficial to those who are inclined to it, while it will haunt those who are not (as yet). Drawing this connection between medieval mysticism and contemporary political rhetoric does not mean to imply that they amount to the same. I did, however, mean to show that the rhetoric of fire is *prone* to abuse.

[10] Denys Turner has offered a very stimulating reading of St. John of the Cross (and of other "apophatic" writers) that relates their thoughts to postmodern ideas (Turner (1999), 8): The critique of the (modern) prioritisation of the I is a or rather the Leitmotif of his study. With respect to St. John of the Cross's view on human (religious) suffering in his "The dark Night of the Soul", Turner points out that this negative "experience" itself questions the alleged experientialism: Both depression and the dark nights are, Turner points out, experiences of a loss of identity. But while the depressed person hopes for a restoration of his or her self-image, "the passive nights 'deconstruct' not only the given self of experience, but also the 'therapeutic' self, the 'woundable' self, which is implicit in that self of experience." (Turner (1999), 237) On first sight, Turner's reading appears to relate St. John of the cross to our intellectual situation. But upon closer inspection, Turner seems to take this salutary function of the "dark night" for granted, contrasting it to the "therapeutical" self. In this respect, his reading eventually does not make St. John of the Cross more accessible for a contemporary account for suffering, which I would argue ought not to *divide* the actual experience of the suffering individual from the perspective that religious practice might reveal to that experience.

[11] On Kierkegaard's reference to this verse, see below note 51.

[12] St. John of the Cross (1964), 373.

[13] I would argue that this is the case in spite of the fact that St. John of the Cross's thought can have a certain force in fictional literature. See Fiddes (1991), 183.

sickness that never ends, not even in death, but is stuck between life and death like Kafka's *Hunter Gracchus*.

In conclusion, I would argue that the mystic embrace of suffering can hardly be communicated in our times. There are, of course, also contemporary authors who embrace suffering. I will name only two examples: Romano Guardini, a Catholic philosopher of religion, and Emmanuel Lévinas, a Jewish phenomenologist.[14] Romano Guardini points out that there is a "heaviness of things" that comes with melancholy and that can give things their own gravity by enhancing insight.[15] In his study about eschatology and purification, Guardini explains how "purificiation" conceptualises the abolishment of negative aspects of mankind; Guardini concludes that no "righteous" person could claim that he was unable to relate to that.[16] The very idea of a "heaviness of things" relies on idealist assumptions about a ground of being that are far from self-evident to us. Furthermore, Guardini's moralist argumentation lacks evidence in our times, in which the foundations of morals have become unstable.[17]

For Emmanuel Lévinas, suffering is endless, because any relation to the other that does not entail suffering must 'infinitely' fall short:

The intention *toward another*, when it has reached its peak, turns out to belie intentionality. *Toward another* culminates in *for another*, a suffering for his suffering, without light, that is, without measure. [...][18]

The subject must take over an unending pain, it is "bound to the adversity or suffering of pain. [...] The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to affection, sensibility [...]."[19] Lévinas uses crass metaphors to describe how he envisions this exposure.

To revert oneself [...] is to empty oneself anew to oneself, to absolve oneself, like in a hemophiliac's haemorrhage.[20]

Subjectivity then means "making a gift of my own skin."[21] Pronouncements such as these illustrate the consequences of concepts that attribute meaning to suffering and

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[14] Along similar lines, Simone Weil suggested that one should love the God who is the source of evil (see Ewertowski (1994), 258).

[15] Guardini (2003), 40.

[16] Guardini (2002), 52f.

[17] Even though exploring philosophical presuppositions sceptically, Denys Turner also endorses an appreciation of pain that I find problematic. Summarising his synoptic reading of Plato's allegory of the cave and of Moses's ascent to Mount Sinai in Ex 19ff., Turner concludes that "[i]n both the Allegory and in Exodus, there is an ascent toward a brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a 'luminous darkness'. (Turner (1999), 17f.)

[18] Lévinas (1981), 18.

[19] Lévinas (1981), 50.

[20] Lévinas (1981), 92.

"fail" (as I would put it) to articulate the need for the *overcoming* of suffering.[22] Again, I am aware that suffering cannot always be overcome, but I will reject a kind of thought that completely fades out any hope for the overcoming of suffering by glorifying it.

1.2.   Demarcating the field

I will shortly demarcate the field of my study negatively with regard to the question concerning which issues I do not intend to tackle. To comment on "suffering" and to try to find meaning in it may appear to concern the theological *locus* of theodicy.[23] However, the following work does not intend to comment on the intrinsic meaning of negative events and experiences; rather, it starts off from the observation that there *are* negative experiences and events and that these trigger existential processes. It is with these existential processes that the following work is concerned; the existence of negativity is being presupposed. The fact that negativity can engender meaningful journeys to selfhood does not imply any ontological assumptions about negativity.

Accordingly, the following essay describes models that make sense *within* particular *historical* constellations: Kierkegaard's struggle with aporias is bound to idealistic ideas of selfhood; Kafka's personal misery may reflect a particularly modern malaise of the (socially) disintegrated subject, Adorno evaluates his age as a time of oppression and coercion, Philip Roth immerses himself in individual catastrophes that are related to a particular view on the society in the USA of the 1990ies. *Within* these negative frames of references, particular responses to suffering can be described. The structure of the responses can be compared, and particular elements of these structures may prove to be mutually illuminative. It is in *this* respect only that the following essay can claim to unearth aspects of suffering that are transcendental, i.e., structures the validity of which extends further than their particular historical context. But negativity itself, the source and the transcendent

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[21] Lévinas (1981), 138.

[22] Edith Wyschogrod has commented very carefully on what she calls the "paradox of saintly suffering": "[...] on the one hand the saints alleviate suffering but on the other hand impose it on herself/himself. Is it not the obligation of another, if not the saint's responsibility, to alleviate this personal suffering?" (Wyschogrod (1991), 38) Wyschogrod also refers to the tradition of sacred pain, though in a rather descriptive kind of way and without controversial discussion: "Extremes of ecstasy and distress express the organic range of saintly corporeality, quite literally the systole and diastole of saintly consciousness in which the body as a whole expresses itself." (Wyschogrod (1991), 18, with reference to Theresa of Avila and Michel de Certeau)

[23] Theodicy is an issue of this essay only in so far that the idea of the messianic, which is constantly present in Gershom Scholem's and Theodor W. Adorno's thought, could be related to an eschatological theodicy. But this is a theoretical possibility that the following essay is not concerned with, for I will discuss the actual meaning of the processes that are triggered by negativity rather than the question whether God respectively the world can be justified.

meaning of suffering "as such"[24], remains strictly outside of this scope. Suffering *triggers* a process, and I am concerned with that process.[25]

Furthermore, the following text does not develop the Christological dimension of the notion of "constructive destruction", though I do want to point out very briefly how the existential idea of constructive destruction and its Christological correspondent relate to one another: The concept of the "death of death", "mors mortis", can be traced back to the Old Testament. Hos 13,4[26], which resounds in 1. Cor 14,54lf.[27], was famously taken up in Luther's phrase "Eyn spott aus dem tod ist worden"[28] – "death has been ridiculed" – and has finally inspired Hegel's doctrine of the death of death.[29] In Luther, the logic of death of death[30], i.e., the logic of violent rebellion against death, is closely tied to existential dialectics, as can be seen e.g. in his letters of consolation. Luther writes to his ailing friend Stockhausen:

[...] The darts of the devil cannot be removed pleasantly and without effort if they are so deeply imbedded in your flesh. They must be torn out by force. Accordingly you must say: "[...] to hell with dying and death."[31]

The dialectics of a transgression through (experienced) death is again related to the salutary despair[32], which prepares for Kierkegaard's existential dialectics. Before we turn to Kierkegaard, however, I will make a few more comments on the particular overall journey that this essay is about to embark on.

1.3. Mapping the journey

In the following essay, I will offer close readings of writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Kafka and Philip Roth. A few comments will be made

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[24] If there is such a thing as "suffering 'as such'".

[25] If I were asked for my personal opinion, I would claim that suffering is an unsolvable riddle, a shortcoming in the world which I perceive as God's creation. I see no need to forgive God for the suffering that we must blame him for. There is no end to lamentation. But lamentation already has a meaning for human beings, and therefore it does not remain empty, although the fissure in the world that lies at its heart will not be closed before the end of times.

[26] Hos 13:14: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes." On Hos 13.14 and its relation to the concept of "mors mortis, see Fischer (1979); Balthasar (1984); Ebeling (1987).

[27] "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" (Isa 25,7)

[28] Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch, nr. 76. See Krause (1982); Jüngel (1983), 93.

[29] In contemporary philosophy of religion, the "death of death" is particularly important for the work of Thomas Altizer; see Altizer (1990), 70.80.84.86 etc.

[30] Luther, WA 40/1,267,4f.: "[...] mors devorat mortem [...]"; WA 15, 218, 26f., see Jüngel (1983), 93.

[31] To Jonas von Stockhausen, November 27, 1532: Luther (1955), 88f.

[32] "Ego ipse non semel offensus sum usque ad profundum et abyssum desperationis, ut optarem nunquam esse me creatum hominem, antequam scirem, quam *salutaris illa esset desperatio* et quam gratiae propinqua." (Luther (1883ff.) WA 18,719,9-12 [*de servo arbitrio*]); see below p. 25.

about the selection of authors. Søren Kierkegaard can be seen as a typically *modern* suffering individual. This applies particularly to his preoccupation with the I and its self-relation, an issue that virtually does not exist prior to the rise of the modern subject. Furthermore, Kierkegaard embodies the intersection of different perspectives that are relevant for this work: not only does he comment extensively about suffering, his works are also situated at the intersection of the philosophy of religion and literature, which will become particularly clear in my closer exploration of the pseudonymity of the *Sickness unto Death*.

Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the modern ailment is circumspect – unlike the therapy that he recommends. Meaning has to be 'wrung out of' Kierkegaard's writings, as Adorno has effectively shown. While Kierkegaard's works primarily help to understand "suffering", Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard is of particular interest for the idea of "constructive destruction" that is at the horizon of this study. Adorno has illustrated that and how the positive can only be gained from the negative; Kierkegaard may have made very similar claims, yet his theory of selfhood is, as Adorno shows, in itself aporetic.[33]

The very idea of "constructive destruction" is taken from the aphorisms of Franz Kafka, written during his stay in Zürau, where he recovered from a haemorrhage. I will focus on that period and look at Kafka's response to suffering in the phase of his life in which he was immediately and intimately struck by suffering, i.e., when he had fallen sick of tuberculosis.

Kafka's work has often been related to theology and religious studies. I will not rehearse this debate on the whole. I will, however, investigate one perspective regarding the religious dimension of Kafka's work, i.e., the one that Gershom Scholem took. Scholem described Kafka's work as a "heretical Kabbalah". The 17th century's movement of *Sabbatianism* is one of the prominent guises that this heretical Kabbalah took. What makes Scholem's reading of Kafka particularly interesting is that Sabbatianism is itself an instantiation of the logic that is at the horizon of this study, i.e., a logic that conceptualises a constructive destruction. Indirectly, Maurice Blanchot seems to allude to this connection.

Sabbatianism, again, may be a phenomenon that is not quite as far away from "our" situation as it could appear at first glance. I will argue that Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* instantiates Sabbatian ideas. To what extent Roth actually meant to inscribe his character Mickey Sabbath into the genealogy of the heretical movement is an interesting though not decisive question. My reading aims to show that the novel configures suffering, negativity and constructive destruction in a way that can very well be compared to Sabbatian ideals. This would be true even if the novel had a different title; the main purpose of this section is to show that and how a contemporary piece of literature reveals aspects of the *idea* of constructive destruction.

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[33] See below p. 30ff.

A final word about the tendencies that may be implied in this map. The reader may wonder why exclusively Jewish 20th century writers are taken into consideration, whereas the essay initiates with a discussion of the 19th century Lutheran writer Søren Kierkegaard. I do hope that the selection of texts is sensible and I assume that these texts could be counted among the most profound comments on suffering in the 19th and 20th century. However, such a claim begs the question why these should be more profound than others. I cannot answer this question satisfactorily as yet. The present study is, again, the first part of a larger project that I have commenced with. After the completion of this study, I may feel that the selection of texts was premature, or, conversely, I may be able to argue that my preference could be defended. For the time being, I cannot but try to show that either way the texts that I analyse offer suggestive insights into the nature of suffering and, more particularly, into the notion of "constructive destruction" as a strong and meaningful response to suffering.

1.4. On the method of inquiry

This reading is primarily not an exercise of systematic theology, for, if it were, the definition of terms would have to occupy me to a much greater extent than it does. Systematic theology aims to clarify the inner consistency of theological statements[34], and possibly their relation to assumptions that are held both "within" and "outside" of theology – assuming that such a distinction makes any sense in the first place. My readings do have implications particularly for theological anthropology and harmatiology, which I hope to spell out elsewhere. The method of the following work's approach, in contrast, is closer to a historical method in so far as particular phenomena are interpreted with respect to their historical context. Carefully, I suggest links between these phenomena. Yet I do not present an exhaustive "history of the idea of constructive destruction as response to suffering in the modern period". My readings could *contribute* to such a genealogy; but the formal limits of my exercise do not allow me to elaborate the connections between "my" texts in the kind of way that would be required would one want to write such a genealogy.

Seen from the perspective of systematic theology and of the history of ideas, the following work is preliminary. Seen from the perspective of what I would call 'differential analogy', the work may appear to be more free-standing: The overall method that I use is that of analogy, more particularly, of the kind of differential analogy that John D. Caputo and Thomas Carlson have commented on at some length. This differential analogy – Thomas Carlson speaks of an "apophatic analogy" – assumes that different spheres of thought are related to one another in such a way their a) their irreducible diversity is respected, and yet b) they come to illuminate one

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[34] Pannenberg (1991), 21ff.

another.[35] The analogata are taken from philosophy and the philosophy of religion and literature. The following inquiry is therefore not *based* in any of the three disciplines; rather, it encourages indiscretions between them, while maintaining awareness for the discretion which must be acknowledged.

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[35] Caputo (1997), 189ff.; Carlson (1999), 17; Carlson (2000); Schmidt (2006), 60-63; 74-78; 87-92; Martinson's notion of a "constellative structure" of theology takes a very similar approach. See Martinson (2000), 332ff.

2. Søren Kierkegaard: The sickness of the I and the literary aesthetics of redemption

The Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard is one of the most prominent religious writers who have extensively pondered negative phenomena of human existence.[36] In what follows, I will focus on Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*. This writing will give us a vivid account of the character, but also of the shortcomings of Kierkegaard's discussion of despair.

2.1. Suffering in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*

The Sickness unto Death offers an analysis of the nature of human despair as well as a theological interpretation.[37] I will focus on the former. The actual thesis of the book is laid bare in its opening passage. Consequentially, this opening passage is extremely condensed, and it is necessary to read it carefully.

The text begins:

Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self, and accordingly can take three forms: in despair not to be conscious of having a self (not despair in the strict since); in despair not to will to be oneself, in despair to will to be oneself. (SD 13 = SV₁ XI 127)

Despair is intimately related to self-consciousness, a fact that betrays how deeply Kierkegaard is embedded in idealism. Formally speaking, these three forms of despair amount to one fundamental form of despair, i.e., a negative relation of the self to itself. For not to be conscious of oneself is a negative relation; the same applies to the will not be oneself, and ultimately also to that which Kierkegaard calls "desperately willing to be oneself". It is not immediately obvious that this last kind,

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[36] In his biography that was recently translated into English, Joakim Garff disapprovingly notes that "[p]osterity has very much doted on the Kierkegaard who doted on his melancholia and wrote page upon page about his unspeakable sufferings, his *vita ante acta* [Latin: previous life], the thorn in the flesh [...]." (Garff (2005), 438) Garff reminds us that "[...] Kierkegaard's unhappiness, his sorrow and his despair, also *interested* him -- and he was rarely so depressed that he did not feel like writing about it." (Garff (2005), 438) Garff's critique does not discourage me. The fact that Kierkegaard continuously wrote hardly disputes the fact that he was severely melancholic, for writing is not a sign of mental health. (Writing may contribute to mental health, but that is quite a different thing.) I would even go so far as to argue that Kierkegaard's work is split into ironic responses to suffering and other responses that are completely void of irony. "Either/Or" and "The Repetition" e.g. fall in the former category, "Stages on a Lives Way" and his discourse on "The Thorn in the Flesh" in the latter (Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses = SV₁ V 108-123; see below). Kierkegaard was indeed rarely so depressed that he did not feel like writing about existential negativity, yet sometimes he does so in a kind of way that displays the writer's ability to step outside of his own experience

[37] See note 52.

"desperately willing to be oneself", is negative, but I think it can be shown that Kierkegaard is right in making this assumption: If it is the case that a person desperately wills to be him- or herself, then this means that the person implicitly acknowledges that he or she is not (properly) him- or herself as yet.

If, then, we can infer from this first sentence of Kierkegaard's treatise that despair is a qualification of the relation of the self to itself, then the next step must be to understand how the self-relation of the self is conceived of. Kierkegaard writes

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. (SD 13 = SV₁ XI 127)

Kierkegaard's idealism comes vehemently to a fore as he proposes that spirit was the definition of the human being, that is, of the self. The meaning of this sentence is somewhat obscured by the equivocation of "relation". And yet the different nuances of "relation" must be held apart in order for the subsequent line of thought to be intelligible. In order to clarify the terms, I will from now on index the word "relation" as factual relation (relation_{[factual]}) on the one hand and conscious relation (relation_{[conscious]}) on the other hand.

The self is – looked at *superficially* – a "factual" relation, i.e., the relation that the self happens to be, consciously or not.

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between the two. (SD 13 = SV₁ XI 127)

I will henceforth call this relation "relation_{[factual]}." Now relation_{[factual]} is precisely *not* the self.

Considered this way [i.e., as relation_{[factual]}], a human being is still not a self. (SD 13 SV₁ XI 127)

The true self, again, is spirit and consciousness. We will therefore suspect that the true self is a relation that actively and consciously constitutes itself, rather than just "being." With support from the distinction between relation_{[factual]} and relation_{[conscious]}, Kierkegaard's logical cascades become much more accessible.

In the relation_{[factual]} between the two, the relation_{[factual]} is the third as a *negative* unity, and the two relate to the relation_{[factual]} and in the relation_{[factual]} to the relation_{[factual]}; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation_{[factual]} between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation_{[conscious]} relates itself to itself, this relation is the *positive* third, and this is the self. (SD 13 = SV₁ IX 127 – emphasis mine)

We must quickly rehearse this distinction: a negative relation, relation_{[factual]}, is the mere coincidence of something. The self is relation_{[factual]} in so far as the self first of all happens to be in the world as a composition of two poles. We *say* that the two poles "relate to one another", but they do so in a kind of way that does not entail any

action. Their relation is a negative relation with respect to this absence of actuality, its "thingness" that simply appals Kierkegaard. On the level of relation$_{[factual]}$, the poles relate to each other in a kind of way that does not differ from how two cows on the meadow or rather two stones on ground "relate" to one another.

The human self, on the contrary, is the (only) relation$_{[conscious]}$ that deserves to be called relation$_{[conscious]}$ in a positive sense, a relation$_{[conscious]}$ that is conscious of itself as a relation. The human being is the self, relation$_{[conscious]}$ that is raised above the state of "thingness" of relation$_{[factual]}$ precisely by his or her conscious act of realising that "*I* am this relation$_{[relation[factual]}$ *turning into* relation[conscious] in the very moment of this realisation]$^{.}$" (*My paraphrase*) I will henceforth use a third category term, i.e. relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$, to refer to the relation of the self to itself that constitutes the self in the very act of relating to itself.

The key problem of Kierkegaard's theory is that this reversal or progression of relation $_{[factual>conscious]}$ does not go smoothly: it faces resistance. In the very moment of the reversal of relation$_{[factual]}$ to relation$_{[conscious]}$, relation$_{[factual]}$ is not annihilated, and for Kierkegaard, it is not "sublated" ["*aufgehoben*"] in the way it is for Hegel. The Hegelian triplex machinery, thus Kierkegaard, stops precisely because relation$_{[conscious]}$ cannot quite get over relation$_{[factual]}$. For it despairs with the simple fact that the bold sentence "I am this relation" is followed by a much less enthusiastic "That's the state of affairs that happen to be the case." The self finds itself to be a relation$_{[factual]}$, it does not engender it; rather, it has been established.

The human being is [...] a derived, established relation. (SD 13 = SV$_1$ 127 XI)

Kierkegaard nowhere explains what allows him to make such an audacious claim, he simply takes it for granted, or rather, he derives it from his theology that he smuggles into his phenomenology of the self.

If the relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$ that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$ is indeed the third, but this relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation$_{[factual]}$ [and also relation[factual>conscious]].

The human self is such a derived, established relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$, a relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$ that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (SD 13f. = SV$_1$ XI 127f.)

The slight embarrassment that my system betrays as I added "[and also relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$]" to "relation$_{[factual]}$" in this quotation can be seen as the decisive hint to the essential dilemma described in *The Sickness unto Death*. The "other power" that has established the relation has not only established the relation$_{[factual]}$, but also the relation$_{[factual>conscious]}$. Precisely in the moment where the

self may see itself at the very peak of its autonomy, it must acknowledge[38] that everything, the state of affairs *and* the realisation of the state of affairs performed by the allegedly spontaneous self that proclaims "*I* am a relation," are in fact *both* established by another power. For, again, the self has *found* itself to be relating itself to itself. This preceding facticity is the catastrophe of the autonomous spirit, the experience that in the midst of the joyful exclamation "*I* am a relation," the I is not really acting, because it never had an alternative. The self does not become a relation by exclaiming that it is one; rather the self closes ranks with itself by stating what is the case.

This is the reason why there can be three rather than two forms of despair.

This is why there can be two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human being had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to want to be oneself. (SD 14 = SV₁ XI 128)

Kierkegaard is speaking in the *irrealis*; the human being has *not* established itself, and there is therefore a third form of despair. If the self had established itself, then at least it *could* get rid of itself by dying, and yet precisely because it has been established by another power, it will act in relation to that other power no matter what it does, and by acting in relation to another, it will continue to be a self. Therefore, it can not stop relating to the over power, which entails that the self cannot stop being a self, consequentially, it can never die.[39]

This second formulation [in despair to will to be oneself] is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation. Yes, this second form of despair (in despair to will to be oneself) is so far from designating merely a distinctive kind of despair that, on the contrary, all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it. If the despairing person is aware of his despair, as he thinks he is, and does not speak meaninglessly of it as of something that is happening to him (somewhat as one suffering from dizziness speaks in nervous delusion of a weight on his head or of something that has

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[38] Assuming that the prerequisite "The human being is [...] a derived, established relation" (SD 13 = SV₁ 127 XI) can be sustained.

[39] This is also the reason why Kierkegaard writes in the preface: "Just one more comment, no doubt unnecessary, but nevertheless I will make it: once and for all may I point out that in the whole book, as the title indeed declares, despair is interpreted as a sickness, not as a cure. Despair is indeed that dialectical." (SD 6 = SV₁ XI 118) Dying is not an option: "Literally speaking, there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will die from this sickness or that it will end in physical death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die. [...] When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die." (SD 17f. = SV₁ XI 131f.) "The person in despair cannot die [...] [I]t is precisely over this that he despairs (not as having despaired): that he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (SD 18f. = SV₁ XI 132) I am aware that Kierkegaard derives the impossibility of death from the phenomenon of despair, not from the definition of the self. By doing the latter, I am reading Kierkegaard against the grain, thus foreshadowing my appropriation of Adorno's interpretation of Kierkegaard, which does the same. On Adorno's comment on "the dying of the self", see below p. 32ff.

fallen down on him, etc., a weight and a pressure that nevertheless are not something external but a reverse reflection of the internal)[40] and now with all his power seeks to break the despair by himself and by himself alone – he is still in despair and with all his presumed effort only works himself all the deeper into despair. (SD 14 = SV_1 XI 128)

Despair is thus the inevitable consequence of the constitution of the self: The self realises that its allegedly self-constitutive action, the realisation of itself as a relation[factual>conscious], is essentially not the self's own action. Thus, a battle against the lack of autonomy of the self is triggered; it is a battle that "either intensifies the despair in a still higher form or leads to faith."[41] The only alternative to despair is that the self were to humble itself[42], that it be broken[43] and lost[44]; *then* despair is a thoroughfare to faith.[45] Faith is the opposite to despair in so far as the faithful self relates to itself (as constituted as a unity of opposites by God) without despair and "rests transparently" in God.

The main point here is simply that the definition [of sin as despair before God], like a net, embraces all forms. And this it does, as can be seen if it is tested by posing its opposite: faith, by which I steer in this whole book as by a trustworthy navigation guide [sømærke]. Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God. (SD 82 = SV_1 XI 194)[46]

Thus far we have understood the concept of despair and its relation to the self; we must now relate "despair" to suffering in order to appreciate the contribution that Kierkegaard makes to the theme of this essay.[47] The relation between suffering and despair mirrors the dichotomy that we have described in the usage of the concept "relation" on a different level.

Kierkegaard uses the term "suffering" both in a derogatory and in an affirmative tone. This equivocation corresponds to the distinction between a kind of suffering that is caused externally, "historical" suffering so to speak, which is a sign of being "fallen" to the world. We could call this suffering "suffering[external]." According to Kierkegaard, the understanding of "suffering" as something externally engendered is

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[40] This remark that Kierkegaard makes in the third addition printed in brackets provides the link between this introductory reflection on despair and the closer inspection of Kierkegaard's evaluation of different forms of negative experiences: negative experiences, thus the consequence of Kierkegaard's excessive idealism, are misunderstood so long as the self blames an *external* cause, rather than internally appropriating the experience with a conscious act. The distinction between relation[factual] and relation[conscious] will be mirrored by a distinction between suffering[external] and suffering[internal] (see below p. 15ff.).

[41] SD 60 = SV_1 XI 171.

[42] SD 61 = SV_1 XI 173; SD 70 = SV_1 XI 180f.; SD 78 = SV_1 XI 190; SD 86 = SV_1 XI 197.

[43] SD 65 = SV_1 XI 177.

[44] SD 67 = SV_1 XI 178.

[45] SD 67 = SV_1 XI 178.

[46] I will comment on the particular words of this passage later on (see below p. 20ff.). See the more extensive (dogmatic) version of this definition: "[S]in is – after being taught by a revelation from God what sin is – before God in despair not to will to be oneself or in despair to will to be oneself." (SD 96 = SV_1 XI 207; see also SD 30 = SV_1 XI 143; SD 131 = SV_1 XI 241).

[47] It is worth noting that Hermann Hesse's "Steppenwolf" also draws this distinction: "'I don't despair. As to suffering – oh, yes, I know all about that!'" (Hesse (2001), 148)

plainly a misunderstanding. In contrast, the kind of suffering that is taking place in inwardness, genuine suffering, links the human being to God. The internal suffering could be called "suffering$_{[internal]}$". This suffering$_{[internal]}$ could be seen as the true suffering in so far as Climacus says "suffering is precisely inwardness"[48].

Suffering$_{[external]}$ is then quite distinct from despair; it amounts to a vulgar and incomplete stage that at best precedes despair, i.e., "despair not to be conscious of having a self"[49]. Suffering$_{[internal]}$ is the state where the individual has become conscious of the fact that it is him or her that is actively (one could almost say: spontaneously) suffering, and not suffering that befalls him or her. If we were to imagine a scene that portrays this distinction, we could say that suffering$_{[external]}$ would be expressed by the exclamation of a suffering person: "I *suffer*", whereas suffering$_{[internal]}$ transforms this to the exclamation: "*I* suffer." Suffering$_{[internal]}$ correlates to 'authentic', i.e., "conscious" despair.[50] Authentic despair is the suffering of the self that has become aware of his or her suffering as her conscious *act*[51], which, in relation to God, is an act of rebellion, just like the consciously desperate self rebels against God who undermines its autonomy, as we have seen above. The rebellious nature of despair (and this would also apply to conscious suffering) is beautifully portrayed in an image at the end of the first part[52] of "The Sickness unto Death". The self, Kierkegaard points out, wants to hold its own malfunction against the other power that constituted the self; this is the last possible upheaval of the autonomous I against a creator who limits the autonomy of the I.

Figuratively speaking, it is an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error – perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production – and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred against him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author. (SD 74 = SV₁ XI 185)

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[48] CUP 288 = SV₁ VII 247.

[49] SD 13 = SV₁ XI 127

[50] As opposed to the 'improper' or 'inauthentic' despair', i.e., "not despair in the strict sense" (SD 13 = SV₁ XI 127).

[51] "Christianly understood, then, not death is 'the sickness unto death'; not even less so is everything that goes under the name of earthly temporal sufferings: need, illness, misery, hardship, adversities, torments, mental sufferings, cares, grief. And even if such things were so hard and painful that we human beings or at least the sufferer, would declare 'This is worse than death' – all those things, which, although not sickness, can be compared with sickness, are still, Christianly understood, not the sickness unto death." (SD 8 = SV₁ XI 122) See also SD 67 = SV₁ XI 179: "[Despair] does not come from the outside as a suffering under the pressures of externalities but comes directly from the self" and SD 99 = SV₁ XI 210: "Both manifestations [of sin] jointly indicate that despair does not come from the outside but from within." – This distinction is mirrored in Kierkegaard's distinction between the sufferings of Paul the Apostle that "are only in the external world" and that which he himself calls his "thorn in the flesh", which is a heavenly reminder (Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses 333 = SV₁ V 111).

[52] The first part of the "Sickness Unto Death" ("The sickness unto death is despair") is a phenomenological analysis, whereas the second part ("Despair is sin") inscribes this analysis in Christian harmatiology. I do not dwell on this distinction, because it is subverted by the book itself: The first section of the book relies on dogmatic assumptions, as I have indicated, and the second part still relies on phenomenological means of inquiry. Neither section is purely one or the other.

Suffering and despair are *spiritualised* in Kierkegaard's account. It is worthwhile to dwell on this observation a little longer, for Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard, to which we will turn soon, consists to a large part of a (dialectically constructive) criticism of Kierkegaard's spiritualising philosophy. Kierkegaard points out that despair is a "qualification of the spirit"[53] and its extent is directly proportional to the extent of consciousness.[54] Despair, furthermore, is stronger than the desire to be freed from suffering[external]. The person who desperately does not want to be himself or herself would rather suffer than accept the help of a "'Helper' for whom all things are possible", and on whom he or she would become dependent if His help were to be accepted.[55] The external aspect of suffering can then be but a sign for the internal suffering; therein lies the only benefit and legitimisation of suffering[external]. The God-relationship is eternal, just like despair as an inevitable consequence of an ill relation of the self to itself (as a unity of opposites[56]) and to God cannot ever end[57] – except, as we have seen, for faith: Despair never devours *itself*, the only way for despair to end is that one would surrender oneself to God. This account for despair may appear to be problematic. I will, however, try to show that the *aesthetics* of Kierkegaard's late writings casts a much brighter light on his response to suffering.

2.2.   Pseudonymity and the Seamark

Thus far, I have been attributing *The Sickness unto Death* to Søren Kierkegaard. This is slightly aberrant in so far as the book was published pseudonymously, i.e., under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. Pseudonymity is a very basic kind of literary fiction. More particularly, pseudonymity is a device that can turn a text into fiction, though the text my initially have appeared to be non-fictional. Precisely this is the case with *The Sickness unto Death*. In order to understand the meaning that the pseudonymity

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[53] SD 24 = SV$_1$ XI 138. Consequentially, Anti-Climacus later on states that "[...] sin is specifically a qualification of the spirit." (SD 81 = SV$_1$ XI 193) In line with these assumptions, Climacus had asserted that "Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, and at its maximum an infinite, interested passion for one's eternal happiness." (CUP 33 = SV$_1$ VII 21)

[54] The ever increasing intensity of despair depends on the degree of consciousness or is proportionate to its increase: the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair. (SD 42 = SV$_1$ XI 154). The character of despair as act becomes particularly evident as even the form of despair that is (only seemingly inconsequentially) related to suffering is despair precisely via the conscious act (see also SD 62 = SV$_1$ XI 174) in which the self relates to the externally caused suffering, is a "despair in weakness, a suffering of the self; but with the aid of the relative reflection that he has, he attempts to sustain his self, and this constitutes another difference from the purely immediate man." (SD 54 = SV$_1$ XI 167)

[55] SD 71 = SV$_1$ IX 182; see also SD 77 = SV$_1$ XI 190: "[The poet-existence] would like very much to be himself before God, but with the exclusion of the fixed point where the self suffers; there in despair he does not will to be himself)."

[56] "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis." (SD 13 = SV$_1$ XI 127)

[57] Despair is "perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not to die, to die death." (SD 18 = SV$_1$ XI 132)

imposes on the phenomenological treatise *The Sickness unto Death*, we must first of all acquaint ourselves with the pseudonym "Anti-Climacus."

The majority of Kierkegaard's journal entries regarding Anti-Climacus present the pseudonym Anti-Climacus as a sort of "God's terrorist" who forces his listeners down on their knees: Anti-Climacus reminds the hearers that being a disciple should not be taken too lightly[58]; Kierkegaard likens him to (the voice of) a judge, who also judges him, Kierkegaard[59]; a voice that, though its demands are impossible to fulfil, "must at least be heard."[60] It is a voice that calls to a halt[61] and that fulfils Kierkegaard's own task, which is "continually to jack up the price."[62] When Kierkegaard thought of the pseudonym Anti-Climacus for the first time, he was considering a pseudonym that should be "recklessly ironical and humorous"[63]. In a letter to Rasmus Nielsen, Kierkegaard dwells particularly on the prefix of the name "Anti-Climacus." Again, Anti-Climacus is described as someone who performs an attack.

I am sending you a new book. Presumably you will have no difficulty in discovering why this pseudonym is called *Anti*-Climacus, in which respect he is quite different from Johannes Climacus, with whom he certainly does have something in common (as they do also share parts of a name), but from whom he differs very essentially in that J. Cl. humorously denies that he himself is Christian and, in consequence, can only make indirect attacks, and, in consequence, as a humorist must take it all back – while Anti-Climacus is very far from denying that he himself is a Christian, which is evident in the *direct attack*. [Emphasis mine][64]

And yet, as I already mentioned, there are also journal entries that suggest that the function of the pseudonym Anti-Climacus is far more complex.

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[58] JP 695 = Pap. X₃ A 653.

[59] JP 6442 = Pap. X₁ A 536. Kierkegaard sees himself as situated below his pseudonym Anti-Climacus, and yet above the pseudonym Climacus: "Just as the Guadalquibir River (this occurred to me earlier and is somewhere in the journal [i.e., IX A 422]) plunges down somewhere into the earth, so is there also a stretch, the upbuilding, which carries my name. There is something (the esthetic) which is lower and is pseudonymous and something which is higher and is also pseudonymous, because as a person I do not correspond to it. The pseudonym is Johannes Anticlimacus in contrast to Climacus, who said he was not a Christian. Anticlimacus is the opposite extreme: a Christian on an extraordinary level – but I myself manage to be only a very simple Christian." (JP 6431 = Pap. X₁ A 510) See also JP 6433 = Pap. X₁ A 517: "Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common, but the difference is that whereas Johannes Climacus places himself so low that he even says of himself that he is not a Christian, one seems to be able to detect in Anti-Climacus that he regards himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level [*in margin*: see p. 260, p. 267 (i.e. X₁ A 530, 536)], at times he also seems to believe that Christianity really is only for geniuses, using the word in a non-intellectual sense. His personal guilt, then, is to confuse himself with ideality (this is the demonic in him), but his portrayal of ideality can be absolutely sound, and I bow to it. I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus."

[60] JP 6445 = Pap. X₁ A 546.

[61] JP 6450 = Pap. X₁ A 557; JP 6461 = Pap. X₁ A 593; JP 6518 = Pap. X₂ A 17; JP 6530 = Pap. X₂ A 192; PV 6 = SV₁ XIII 495.

[62] JP 6464 = Pap. X₁ A 615.

[63] JP 6141 = Pap. IX A 9.

[64] JP 6434; Letters No. 213 [July, 1849].

This can best be ascribed to Anti-Climacus.

I gladly undertake, by way of a brief repetition, to emphasize what other pseudonyms have emphasized. The absurd is not he absurd or absurdities without any distinction (wherefore Johannes de Silentio: "How many of our age understand what the absurd is?"). The absurd is a category, and the most developed form is required to define the Christian absurd accurately and with conceptual correctness. The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd – faith transforms it, but faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge. The absurd terminates negatively before the sphere of faith, which is a sphere by itself. To a third person the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd; so must a third person judge, for a third person does not have the passion of faith. Johannes de Silentio has never claimed to be a believer; just the opposite, he has explained that he is not a believer – in order to illuminate faith negatively. (JP 10 = Pap. X^6 B 79 [1850])[65]

Just how this strategy of 'negative illumination'[66] is associated with Kierkegaard will be explored more thoroughly with reference to an extensive entry where Kierkegaard comments on the relationship between the pseudonym Anti-Climacus and his precedent, Climacus. Kierkegaard describes Anti-Climacus, the Christian to an extraordinary degree, as the higher pseudonym, while he sees Climacus as the lower pseudonym. I will have a closer look at one of the texts were Kierkegaard expresses this view.

[*in margin*: A passage in the preface to the book *The Sickness unto Death*.] To the closing passage, "but that the form is what it is", I have thought of adding: apart from the fact that it is also rooted in my being who I am. But this would be going too far in transforming a fictitious character into actuality; a fictitious character has no possibility other than the one he has; he cannot declare that he could also speak in another way and yet be the same; he has no identity which encompasses many possibilities. On the other hand, the fact that he says: "it is at least well considered" – is proper, for it may very well be that, although it is only form. For him to say: "It is psychologically correct" is a double blow, for it is also psychologically correct with respect to Anti-Climacus. Climacus is lower, denies he is a Christian. Anti-Climacus is higher, a Christian on an extraordinarily high level. With Climacus everything drowns in humor; therefore he himself retracts the book. Anti-Climacus is thetical.[67]

The fictional character of the pseudonyms implies that the pseudonyms are unable to reflect on themselves or to look at their own work self-critically; they are confined to the position that they represent. Yet this confinement is beneficial for the reader, which will become clear in an entry that is itself attributed to Anti-Climacus. It begins with words that appear to connect to the preface of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of Johannes Climacus[68], and it continues by pointing out the

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[65] Kierkegaard also draws a connection between Johannes de Silentio and Johannes Climacus in a later (somewhat obscure) passage (JP 6600 = Pap X_6 B 82).

[66] I have tried to show elsewhere that 'negative illumination' can also be attributed to Kierkegaard's early pseudonymous writings (Schmidt (2006), 130,133,182f.).

[67] JP 6439 = Pap. X_1 A 530.

[68] "I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk, assume that the highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one's prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter to this doctrine. [...] How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that

well known contrast between the sceptic Climacus and the Christian Anti-Climacus. They are parasitical on one another as the one says what he says "simply in spite of" the other.[69] This controversial relationship is then framed in a vivid picture:

> For we are related to each other, but we are not twins, we are opposites. Between us there is a deep, a fundamental relationship, but despite the most desperate efforts we never get any farther, any closer, than to a *repelling contact*. There is a point and an instant at which we touch, but at the same instant we fly from each other with the speed of infinity. Like two eagles plunging from a mountain top toward a point, or like an eagle plunging from the top of a cliff and a predatory fish shooting from the ocean's depth to the surface there is a contact, and at the same instant we rush from each other, each to its extremity.
>
> The point we are seeking is this: simply and plainly to be a genuine Christian.[70] There is a contact, but at the same time we fly from each other: Johannes says he is not a Christian, and I say that I am an extraordinary Christian such as there has never been, but please note, in hidden inwardness.
>
> If it should happen sometime that we switched identities at the instant of contact, so that I would say of myself what Johannes says of himself and conversely, it would make no difference. Just one thing is impossible – that we both say the same thing about ourselves; on the other hand it is possible that we both could vanish. (JP 6349 = Pap. X^6 B 48)

The concluding paragraph of this entry is of particular impact in so far as it emphasises the aesthetic function of the pseudonymous cast of the writings.

> Actually, we do not exist, but he who does come to be simply and plainly a genuine Christian will be able to speak of us as two brothers – opposites – just as the sailor speaks of the twins by which he steers. Just as the sailor tells about the fantastic things he has seen, so also the person who has come to be simply and plainly a Christian will be able to tell about the fantastic things he has seen. Perhaps there are lies in what the sailor tells – this will not be true of what the genuine Christian tells us, for it is true that we two brothers are fantastic figures, but it is also true that *he* has seen us. (JP 6349 = Pap. X^6 B 48)

The motif of a nautical mark is also used in a crucial passage of *The Sickness unto Death*:

> The main point here is simply that the definition [of sin as despair before God], like a net, embraces all forms. And this it does, as can be seen if it is tested by posing its opposite:

Christianity promises?" (CUP 15ff. = SV$_1$ VII 7ff) "I, Anticlimacus, who wrote this little book (a poor, simple, mere man just like most everybody else) was born in Copenhagen and am just about, yes, exactly, the same age as Johannes Climacus, with whom I in one sense have very much, have everything in common, but from whom in another sense I am utterly different. He explicitly says of himself that he is not a Christian; this is infuriating. I, too, have been so infuriated about it that I – if anyone could somehow trick me into saying it – say just the opposite, or because I say just the opposite about myself I could become furious about what he says of himself. I say, in fact, that I am an extraordinary Christian such as there has never been, but, please note, not one, detects anything, even the slightest, but profess I can, and I can profess (but I cannot *really* profess, for then, after all, I would violate the secret's hiding-place) that in hidden inwardness I am, as I said, an extraordinary Christian such as there has never been." (JP 6349 = Pap. X$_6$ B 48)

[69] The reader, who in addition to being my friend is also a friend of understanding, will also readily perceive that, despite my extraordinary Christianity, there is something malevolent in me. For it is sufficiently clear that I have taken this position simply out of spite against Johannes. Had I come first, I would have said of myself what he now says of himself and then he would have been compelled to say of me what I say of him." (JP 6349 = Pap. X$_6$ B 48)

[70] See above note 68.

faith, by which I steer in this whole book as by a trustworthy navigation guide [sømærke]. Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.[71]

The metaphor of "steering" deserves our full attention. Both the function of the fictional characters of Kierkegaard's later works and the "centre" of *The Sickness unto Death* are associated with the nautical metaphor of steering a vessel with the help of a point of orientation.

There is no doubt that our age and Protestantism especially may need the monastery again or that it should exist. "The monastery" is an essentially dialectical element in Christianity; therefore we need to have it out there like a buoy [sømærke] in order to see where we are, even though I myself would not enter it. (JP 2750 = Pap. VIII A 403 [1847])

In order to understand the meaning of the word "sømærke" in *The Sickness unto Death* and what this word tells us about Kierkegaard's literary strategy, we will first take into account all passages where Kierkegaard uses this word.[72] Kierkegaard uses the word "sømærke" in a very similar sense as he refers to the *monastery*: A "sømærke" is a point that provides orientation about one's own standpoint or location precisely by remaining distant from the observer. The monastery, that is, its harshness, indicates to Christianity its own lack of seriousness. Although Kierkegaard would not enter the monastery – because it falls under the verdict of what he calls "external" – he acknowledges that it does have a heuristic function: Kierkegaard does not find it preferable to enter the monastery, but the mere fact that Christianity is *unfit* to enter (regardless of the actual meaning that entering the monastery may or may not have) unmasks Christianity.[73]

The aspect of *distance* is also emphasised in a footnote to Kierkegaard's *Point of View on my Work as an Author*:

The significance of this little book[74] (which does not stand *in* the authorship as much as it relates totally *to* the authorship and for that reason also was anonymous, in order to be kept outside entirely) is not very easy to explain without going into the whole matter. It is like a navigation mark [sømærke] *by* which one steers but, note well, in such a way that the pilot understands precisely that *he is to keep a distance from it*. (PV 6 = SV₁ XIII 495)

At another instance, Kierkegaard, that is, Anti-Climacus, points out that one can only approach a seamark in such a way that one keeps a distance.[75]

The metaphor of the seamark finally provides a link that neatly expresses Kierkegaard's anthropology in relation to his Christology. In his "Practice in Christianity" Anti-Climacus writes:

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[71] SD 82 = SV₁ XI 194.

[72] See McKinnon (1973).

[73] In positive terms, this means that Christians ought to be fit to enter a monastery, even though for other reasons, to actually do so, again, would be a misunderstanding.

[74] Kierkegaard is speaking about a text that he published pseudonymously.

[75] SV₁ XIII 495.

§ 1
The God-man is a sign

What is meant by a *sign*? A sign is the denied immediacy or the second being that is different from the first being. This is not to say that the sign is not immediately something but that it is a sign, and it is not immediately that which it is as a sign or as a sign it is not the immediate that it is. A navigation mark [sømærke] is a sign. Immediately it certainly is something, a post, a lamp, etc., but a sign is not the immediate that it is. (PC 124 = SV₁ XII 116)[76]

These semiotic deliberations may appear to be rather elementary. It is important, however, that for Kierkegaard the "sømærke" appears to be the prime example for the differential nature that all signs share. At this instance, Kierkegaard is referring to the semiotic difference between the signifié and the signifiant, yet he then proceeds to interpret this semiotic cogitation Christologically. Anti-Climacus then points out that Christ the God-man is a "sign of contradiction."

A *sign of contradiction* is a sign that intrinsically contains a contradiction in itself. [...] In Scripture the God-man is called a sign of contradiction. [...] [T]he contradiction is between being God and being an individual human being. (PC 124f. = SV₁ XII 117f.)

If we recall the definition of faith in the *Sickness unto Death*, it becomes clear that the God-man and the complexity of its signification are tightly connected to faith in God: The self of the human beings mirrors the duality of the God-man, as the self, too, is a synthesis of two contradictory poles. From this perspective, it is clear why faith and the God-man are both designated as "sømærker". Faith and the God-man have in common that they are both syntheses that man cannot "figure out." To believe: to relate to oneself to, i.e., to the synthesis that the self is, without despair and thus to ground oneself transparently in God, is impossible in the very same sense in which it is impossible to conceive of the God-man. Phenomenology and theology meet from different angels. This impossibility is the reason for the complex structure of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, which I will now summarise in view of the question of suffering.

Aesthetically, *The Sickness unto Death* depends on entities that guide thinking and yet "are" not: The aesthetic praxis of reading these texts can create a Christian, who in retrospect will say that he has been impacted by the author Anti-Climacus, i.e., that the guidance that he received was a true guidance ("Guidance"). The same applies to the notion of "faith" in the *Sickness unto Death*, which is a seamark in the sense explored above: Faith in the sense that Kierkegaard envisions is unattainable for human conceptualisation and ungraspable for language, and this is why it can be said of Anti-Climacus that he illuminates faith only negatively.[77] The negativity of the "sømærke" – the fact that one must keep at a distance from it – brings forth the text, it does provide orientation for language and praxis, though the meaning can

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[76] See Pattison (1992), 89.
[77] See above p. 19.

only be understood in retrospect, by those who have arrived at (or more precisely: who have been ushered to) the goal.

The structure of the late Kierkegaard's pseudonymity is an extremely vibrant example of an indirect discourse, highly sophisticated and yet utterly teleological.[78] The content of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity, the underlying assumption about despair, is highly problematic: Kierkegaard did not envisage an account for the surmounting of suffering; the very idea is alien to him. But he did (unwillingly) provide a structure for the discourse about this very surmounting, for the discourse about suffering may be confronted with the very same problem as is the case with the discourse about faith: The surmounting of suffering is ultimately unavailable, and yet it does occur, and it must be thought of and talked of in such a way that its necessity and its unavailability are both taken into account.[79]

2.3.   Kierkegaard's reversals

In conclusion, Kierkegaard's theory of suffering is cynical, for it disrespects the concrete suffering of earthly beings and installs an aristocracy of the highly reflective and self-conscious individuals who stand out from the vast majority of persons who erringly think they are struggling with the external world, whereas it is really themselves and their creator with whom everything that is of any impact is concerned.

Kierkegaard's account of suffering falls short. It falls short of true healing. Strictly speaking, there are two reversals at work in Kierkegaard's thought: The reversal from unconscious suffering$_{[external]}$ to conscious suffering$_{[internal]}$ and the reversal from the latter to faith. The reversal of suffering *to* faith may be much more interesting for a theory on the overcoming of suffering, yet unfortunately, Kierkegaard is of little help here. Faith, we rehearse, is the opposite of despair, but there is for Kierkegaard such a thing as suffering beyond despair; faith and suffering can coincide, even though faith and despair can not. We are then left with the first reversal, the reversal from unconscious despair respectively suffering$_{[external]}$, to conscious despair respectively suffering$_{[internal]}$, from the "I *suffer*" to the "*I* suffer."[80] Kierkegaard's distinction between authentic and inauthentic despair is a prime example of existentialist arrogance, and for the suffering individual it is of little help to become conscious.

Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological presuppositions are indeed hard to sustain: Theologically, Kierkegaard embraces a Lutheran paradox that faith be all that is demanded from the human being, whereas it is terribly hard if not impossible for the human being ever to "attain" faith. The desperate self cannot but move ever

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[78] For the denial of the distinct teleology of the indirect communication, see Poole (1993).
[79] See Schmidt (2005).
[80] This ties with the assessor's recommendation that the aesthete was to *choose* his despair.

more deeply into despair. As a consequence, the self can only humble him- or herself under God: "[...] for God everything is possible."[81]

Should we then dispense with Kierkegaard's writings and not read them any longer? Yes and no. We should read them, but, if necessary, dispense with them (i.e., with particular propositions that are unsustainable) in the course of reading. Adorno has taught us how to do this.

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[81] SD 38 – S.V. XIX 150; SD 39 = S.V. XIX 151; Matt. 19,26 par.

3. Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard: Constructive destruction

3.1. Interlude: Christian and Jewish versions of "reversal"

Kierkegaard's theory of the self has many deficits. I have emphasised particularly what could be called the "spiritualisation" of the self. This shortcoming of Kierkegaard's theory may reflect a shortcoming that was typical for the philosophy of his age as a whole. Yet what does this mean for the evaluation of Kierkegaard's works? Theodor W. Adorno has argued extensively that the deficits of Kierkegaard's theory lay bare the deficits of his age, but at they same time, the collapse of Kierkegaard's system leaves behind what one could call 'fragments of redemption'[82]. We will now turn to several versions of such a reversal that searches for hope in the midst of a catastrophe.

As I have already mentioned, the texts in this essay that date from the 20th century are all Jewish. At this point, I wish to make one more comment on this fact. The reversal of the negative into the positive that Kierkegaard had in mind is a genuinely Lutheran notion. Lutheran existential dialectics consists of reversals from sin to grace, from desperation to faith.[83] I will shortly comment on the question why the Lutheran versions of this idea may impact us less than the corresponding Jewish "versions" do.

In John Updike's fiction, we find resonances of this (and other) Lutheran trope(s). In the famous Rabbit-sage, we read about the protagonist Harry Angstrom *alias* Rabbit:

Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the *going through* quality of it, the passage *into* death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blown inside out. He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of a paradox. His eyes turn toward the light however it catches his retinas.[84]

Why is it that Harry Angstrom cannot relate to the Lutheran and Kierkegaardian idea of reversal? To some extent, this question needs to be addressed within the context of the plot of the Rabbit-tetralogy.[85] And yet the question remains to be asked whether there are intrinsic features to the Christian notion of reversal that cause them to be less transmissible than the corresponding elements of Jewish thought. In what follows, I will offer a somewhat vast speculation. The word "paradox" may provide a clue. In Jewish thought, the relationship between negativity and positivity is

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[82] I am alluding to Susan Handelman's book *Fragments of Redemption* (1991). The title of Handelman's book about Scholem, Benjamin and Lévinas neatly summarises a concept that Adorno, who was strongly influenced by Benjamin, adopted.

[83] See above note 32.

[84] Updike (1995), 203. For even more obviously Lutheran theorems in the Rabbit-saga, see. e.g. the following remark: "That's why we love disaster, Harry sees, it puts us back in touch with guilt and sends us crawling back to God." (Updike (1995), 933)

[85] See Schmidt (2006b).

embedded in the narratives of exile and in the idea of the messianic.[86] These more extensive contexts may make the Jewish discourses of reversal more accessible and transmutable than the subjectivist Lutheran version of the reversal.

3.2.   Kierkegaard's failure

In his habilitation-thesis on Kierkegaard[87], Adorno reads Kierkegaard against the grain.[88] Adorno's intentional unfaithfulness to Kierkegaard's intention has a twofold motivation: According to Adorno, Kierkegaard a) was trapped in his times; b) by the strength of constructing a philosophical theory that falls apart due to the shortcomings of his age, Kierkegaard's writings perform the most efficient critique of his times that one could imagine, and they instantiate the only sincere illumination of redemption that is imaginable in the face of the conditions that he is subjected to. Adorno thus sees Kierkegaard's work as a *productive* failure. What we find here is the very logic of *reversal* that we have been observing in several different guises.[89] We will try to understand Kierkegaard's failure, and then see how Adorno reads it in a productive kind of way; finally, I will reflect on the overall impact that Adorno's habilitation thesis may have on this study.

According to Adorno, reading Kierkegaard against the grain means to resist the allure of his *poetry*. One should, Adorno argues, never give in to Kierkegaard's lure. Instead, one must always view his words from a perspective other than the one that the context of his work provides; "every insight into Kierkegaard is to be wrung out of his own context." (KKA 13)

Even with the respect to an ultimate convergence of art and philosophy, all attempts so aesthetize philosophical method are to be rebuffed. On the contrary, the more exclusively philosophical form is crystallized as such, the more firmly it excludes all metaphor that

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[86] Particularly the idea of the "messianic" has been readily adopted in Jewish thought in the 20th century not only by Adorno, but also by Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin e.g. has commented on the desirability of the downfall of the world (see Benjamin (1977), 262f.); Benjamin also developed a notion of the reversal of melancholy into redemption (see Bock (2000), 29).

[87] Adorno's habilitation-thesis was supervised by Paul Tillich.

[88] It may be worth noting the Michael Theunissen, one of the key negativist thinkers in continental 20th century philosophy, also reads Kierkegaard against the grain, i.e., against his explicit intention (Theunissen (2005), viff.). At first sight, Theunissen appears to endeavour a project similar to that of Adorno, for Theunissen, like Adorno, wants to keep philosophy and literature apart (Theunissen (2005), viii; see above p. 18) But upon closer inspection it turns out that Theunissen's and Adorno's readings are moving into opposite directions. Adorno finds the true content *in* the metaphor, though what allows him to do this is that he reads the *metaphors* against their initial intention. Theunissen simply dismisses the poetic and the aesthetic altogether and interprets Kierkegaard's "The Sickness unto Death" as a propositional discourse. For Theunissen, metaphors seem to be merely ornamental; for Adorno, they are deceptive, though in a very eloquent kind of way.

[89] It is worth noting that several scholars have *expressis verbis* drawn a link between the Christological concept of the "mors mortis" (see p. 7) and Adorno's dialectics. See Scheible (1980), 36; Hochstaffl (1976), 208ff.

externally approximates it to art. So much the better art is able to survive by the strength of its own law of form. (KKA 14)[90]

Accordingly, Adorno strictly opposes readings that appreciate the poetic quality of Kierkegaard's writings.

This praise [of the aesthetic quality of Kierkegaard's works] dishonors the poetry[91] as well as philosophy. As opposed to the sheer possibility for confoundment, like that of Gottsched's, the first concern of the construction of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's philosophy is to distinguish it from poetry. (KKA 5)

What is revealed by art is essentially the faultiness of the age in which Kierkegaard was entrapped. His aesthetic figures are "marked by that peculiar characteristic of semblance typical of many illustrations of the first half of the nineteenth century." (KKA 7) The meaning of the important term "semblance" will become clear in due course. Semblance, suffice it to say at this point, means that a gap opens up between what a thing pretends to be and what it actually is; this gap is characteristic of the times to which Kierkegaard is bound.

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[90] The meaning of the phrase "law for form" will become clear below. I do, however, want to mention one later text of Adorno that casts light on this phrase: In his essay "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel", Adorno compresses some remarks about the functionality of form that appear to elaborate the idea he refers to in the quoted passage. Adorno starts off by stating that it was not possible any longer "today" to tell a story, and yet the form of the novel requires narration (Adorno (1991), 30; on the "impossibility" of telling a story in the early 20th century see also Benjamin (1986b), 83-107, 83ff.; both Adorno and Benjamin refer to "the war," though Benjamin is referring to the First World War, Adorno to the Second World War). In order to tell a story, one would need to have something *particular* to say, but that is "precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness." (Adorno (1991), 31) If one were to dwell on the concrete reality "nowadays", Adorno writes, then one would "be guilty of a lie: the lie of delivering himself over to the world with love that presupposes that the world is meaningful" (Adorno (1991), 30), which means that one falls prey to *kitsch* and commercialism. (See also Adorno (1951 [= aphorism 5]), 30: "All participation [in society's pleasures] is masked and silent acceptance of the inhuman" [translation my own], which implies: "Only the absolute lie maintains the freedom to tell the truth" (Adorno (1951), 197 [=aphorism 71, translation my own]; "absolute bondage can be recognised, but not depicted" (Adorno (1951), 272 [= aphorism 94, translation my own]). But – unlike painting – the novel cannot emancipate from its object; a novel is bound to resemble a report by its form. Consequentially, the form of the novel, the narration of a plot in the world, prohibits its very nature, that is, to tell. The paradox can only be met by a counter-paradox. Therefore, the novel must run against its (realistic) form: *"If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon realism that only aids the facade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it."* (Adorno (1991), 32) This is what has led e.g. Proust, Jacobsen and Rilke to take leave of the report form by dissolving the outer world in "extreme subjectivism" (Adorno (1991), 32); in the modern novel, "reflection breaks through the pure immanence of form" (Adorno (1991), 34). Thus, the form of the novel, by running up against the conventional (narrative) form of the novel, "takes a stand against the lie of representation" (Adorno (1991), 34), i.e., against the lie that one was able to present anything special at all, rather than reproducing the standards by coercion. "This destruction of form is inherent in the very meaning of form" (Adorno (1991), 34), Adorno puts it, and this enables us to understand the above quoted sentence better: By the means of its own destruction, the form allows the novel to tell once more.

[91] At the heart of this critique lies a somewhat vulgar understanding of poetry. "Poetry" is apparently understood to be utterly unironically, displaying only the perspective of the lyrical I – unlike e.g. the drama or the novel. Reading Kierkegaard's work as poetry would mean to accept the perspective taken by the lyrical I as the key entity for the understanding of the meaning of the poem. This is what Adorno calls takeing a text "at face value" (KKA 198).

Kierkegaard lived in a time that, according to Adorno, experienced the decay of human existence; it was a decay that had philosophical reasons. The objectless inwardness, i.e., a particularly Fichtean way of prioritizing the I prominent in Kierkegaard's age, caused the I to loose its grip on the outer world. According to Adorno, this historical phenomenon is the key to understanding Kierkegaard.

What Kierkegaard describes as "the decay of everything fundamental to human existence" was called, in the philosophical language of his age, the alienation of subject and object. Any critical interpretation of Kierkegaard must take this alienation as its starting point. [...] Kierkegaard conceives of such [i.e., ontological] meaning, contradictorily, as radically developed upon the "I," as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence. – Free, active subjectivity is for Kierkegaard the bearer of all reality. (KKA 27)

Adorno acknowledges that Kierkegaard had aimed to exist outside of society, thus avoiding making a contribution to it. Yet precisely by doing that, he falls into a sociological category, i.e., that of the *rentier*.

By denying the social question, Kierkegaard falls to the mercy of his own historical situation, that of the *rentier* of the first half of the nineteenth century. (KKA 47f.)

[Kierkegaard] gives testimony to the isolation of the individual, living on private income, shut in on himself; an isolation that, in the period of late German romanticism, was expressed in the philosophy only by Arthur Schopenhauer. Kierkegaard was well aware of his affinity to Schopenhauer [...]. (KKA 8)

Kierkegaard is one of the last "Dandies"[92], and at the same time, he anticipates the upcoming era of the metropolis.

Kierkegaard, in fact, reminiscing on the period of *Either/Or*, referred to himself as a *flaneur*[93] and thereby fostered a corporeal similarity of his own image to that of a Baudelarian Dandy. But it is precisely in the dense nexus of these similarities that the differences make themselves sharply apparent. Aestheticism is no "deportment," to be assumed at will. It has both its hour and place: the early history of the metropolis. It is there, like artificial street lighting, in the twilight of incipient despair, that this strange, dangerous, and imperious form emits its beam to eternalize, garishly, life as it slips away. (KKA 7)

In the area of the metropolis, the real is being swallowed by the artificial; "semblance" is the pretension of genuine meaning in a world that has lost its own light. The reified world brings forth melancholy. Melancholy, however, is very meaningful: it speaks of and mourns for that which has been lost.

The melancholy that characterises Kierkegaard's figures must be understood as the designating mark of his whole theory of existence, which, I repeat, falls into the

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[92] See Garff (2004), 137; Huizing (2003).
[93] Later on, Kierkegaard remarks: "The *flaneur* promenades the room; the world appears to him reflected by pure inwardness." (KKA 41)

traps of the philosophy of his age. In this very process, Kierkegaard's writings give testimony of the sadness of the historical world he lives in.

[T]ruth subordinates itself to melancholic semblance through semblance's own dialectic. In its semblance melancholy is, dialectically, the image of an other. Precisely this is the origin of the allegorical character of Kierkegaard's melancholy. (KKA 61; see also KKA 64)

Consequentially, melancholy becomes transparent as "semblance" (KKA 64), that is, it becomes discernible that melancholy is not a diversion of genuine subjectivity, but rather the truth about the Romantic theory of subjectivity. The exposure of the true nature of melancholy is the means towards its redemption (KKA 64), for the diagnosis that melancholy contains provides a hint about the therapy. The therapy consists in the kind of interpretation that penetrates through the surface and beholds the suppressed truth about human existence in its crisis.

When his philosophy – in the name of existence – takes objectless inwardness and mythical conjuration as substantial reality, it capitulates to the semblance that it rejects in the depths of oblivion. Semblance, which illuminates thought from the remoteness of the images like the star of reconciliation, burns in the abyss of inwardness as an all-consuming fire. It is sought out and named in the abyss, if the hope that it radiates is not to be forfeited by knowledge. (KKA 67)[94]

This brightening of a star of redemption[95] must now be explored in more detail.

3.3.   The eloquence of Kierkegaard's failure

According to Adorno, the theoretical centre of Kierkegaard's thought, i.e., the "total" I, is finally nothing but a pure spectator (KKA 27), uninvolved in the world that surrounds it. History is thus being devaluated[96], it is only the "inner" history that is supposed to have meaning; consequentially, the world itself is lost. And yet

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[94] On the healing power of critical thought, see also Adorno (1974), 247: "*Finale.* – The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. [...] To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, *delineates the mirror-image of its opposite.*" To achieve such a perspective of insight is still an arduous task, for the domination (of the reified world) forbids cognition of the suffering that it produces; see Adorno (1951), 106. This sentence may remind one of Theunissen's idea of prolepsis. Yet the difference is that Adorno's idea of a different standpoint is utopian if not messianic, while Theunissen's is descriptive.

[95] The words "star of reconciliation" obviously call to mind Rosenzweig's "Star of Redemption", first published nine years before Adorno's book on Kierkegaard (i.e., in 1921). Adorno speaks of "Gestirn der Versöhnung" rather than of "Stern der Erlösung" (KKA 98). Nonetheless, I find it rather likely that Adorno was thinking of Rosenzweig's work and, wanting to avoid an immediate quotation (for whatever reason), chose to paraphrase the title of Rosenzweig's book.

[96] "Objectless inwardness strictly excludes objective history [...]." (KKA 33)

Kierkegaard involuntarily shows that this absolutisation of the I is aporetic.[97] For Fichte, the outer world is constituted by the I, for Kierkegaard, in contrast, the I is constituted by being thrown back from the outer world.[98] Thus, Kierkegaard portrays the power of the outer world in a way that could not be more efficient: by showing how the attempt to constitute oneself in a way that discharges the outer world fails.

> When Fichte's idealism springs and develops out of the centre of subjective spontaneity, in Kierkegaard the I is thrown back onto itself by the superior power of otherness. (KKA 29)

As a consequence, the historical situation of Kierkegaard becomes pressingly apparent in his writings, in spite of the fact that Kierkegaard disregarded it. Kierkegaard, unlike Fichte, fails to subdue reality to the all-encompassing I. He experiences the resistance of the objective reality – but fails to draw any constructive conclusions from this experience. Therefore, his writings give testimony to the objective reality precisely as reality intrudes into them, shattering the apparent consistence of his theory.

> In Kierkegaard's "situation," historical actuality appears as reflection. Indeed, it appears reflected, literally thrown back. The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate, or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediated, in subjectivity. (KKA 38)[99]

The subject is unable to coerce reality; in this respect, Kierkegaard differs from his Romanticist age, or more particularly, of the Fichtean strand of early German romanticism that Kierkegaard was looking at. At the same time, the subject fails to

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[97] By "aporetic", I mean literally that the conceptualised journey of the self leads into a dead-end: The self cannot constitute itself as pure consciousness, because the self is irreducibly entangled in the objective world. The attempt to conceptualise a self that is superior to the external world is aporetic, for the external world will always haunt the I.

[98] This corresponds to the reading of the opening passage of "The Sickness unto Death", where the catastrophe of the allegedly autonomous I is described (see above p. 14ff.)

[99] On this idea of rebound, see also: KKA 95: "'You transform something accidental into the absolute, and, as such, into the object of your admiration. This has an excellent effect, especially on excitable souls': the sentence from 'The Rotation method' remains ironic as long as the severed external world remains dark and deprived of any truth. But the flash of light that is reflected back on the world, as soon as the dialectic is referred to truth by way of 'occasion,' suffices to reestablish to a certain degree the legitimacy of the collapsed eternal world." Philip Roth, to whose work we will soon turn, articulates a very similar experience of "rebound" in his "The Human Stain". Delphine Roux rehearses her motivation to leave France for the USA as follows: "I will go to America and be the author of my life, she says; I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family's given, I will fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best – and she winds up instead in a drama beyond her control. She winds up as the author of nothing. There is the drive to master things, and the thing that is mastered is oneself." (Roth, HS 273) Delphine Roux therefore fails in her attempt to achieve that which Coleman Silk, her antagonist, had intended to do: "At Howard he'd discovered that he wasn't just a nigger to Washington, D.C. [...]. He was Coleman, the greatest of the great pioneers of the I. [...] Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*. [...] Instead the raw I with all its agility." (Roth, HS 108)

relate to reality/being[100] in any meaningful or constructive way; in this respect, Kierkegaard betrays that he remains trapped in Romanticism. This failure of the I to coerce reality/being involuntarily gives testimony for the meaning of reality/being.

> Concealed being, enciphered "meaning," produces dialectical movement, not blind subjective coercion. This raises Kierkegaard above romantic efforts of reconstruction that claim to be able to recreate ontology whole, phenomenologically. (KKA 31)

The deeper meaning of Kierkegaard's aesthetics is that it gives testimony to its meaningful failure. Interpretation must take Kierkegaard literally and observe how his words turn themselves up against the meaning that he meant them to have.

> There is no way to meet up with him in the fox kennel of infinitely reflected interiority other than to take him by the word; he is to be caught in the traps set by his own hand. [...] Thus, the interpretation of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings must break down the superficially simulated poetic coherence into the polarities of his own speculative intention and a traitorous literalness. (KKA 12)

Kierkegaard's words are turned up against him because they, again, are drenched with the ideology of his times. It is precisely by being obviously drenched with the external that Kierkegaard's words give testimony for the overwhelming power of the external, while this very power was denied by Romanticism. Meaning then evolves as something which is not intended in the words, but splits off from them by necessity if the interpreter observes them closely enough.

> Whereas according to every undiminished theological doctrine the signifying and the signified are unified in the symbolic word, in Kierkegaard the "meaning" separates from the cipher of the text. (KKA 26)[101]

Kierkegaard's reflections about the spirituality of despair provide a very vivid example of the working of the text. It has been noted before that Kierkegaard defines the human being as "spirit", whereas the very nature of that spirit gives birth to despair. Despair and spirit are proportional. From this it follows that the most spiritual being must also be the most desperate. The most spiritual and consequentially the most desperate being is the devil.[102]

> "The devil's despair is the most intense despair, for the devil is sheer spirit, and therefore absolute consciousness and transparency; in the devil there is no obscurity that might serve as a mitigating excuse, his despair is absolute defiance."[103] All this could just as well be said

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[100] Adorno speaks of "being," though he does not mean "being" in the ontological sense, but in the historical sense of that which is historically the case in the real, external world. That is why I write: "being/reality."

[101] See below p. 31.

[102] Kierkegaard does not explain this hypothesis. He must be referring to theological speculations that I was not able to trace.

[103] Adorno cites from Kierkegaard, SD 42 = S.V. XIX 154.

of objectless inwardness [i.e., Kierkegaard's concept of the subject] that does not know *a priori* "whether other human beings" in the world "exist." (KKA 56)

While wanting to describe another's despair, Kierkegaard in fact expresses the *aporia* in which his own system is caught. This aporia, again, consists in the self that attempts to constitute the whole world by virtue of his or her spontaneous, spiritual act which inevitably falls prey to the mechanism of this world. "Hope" comes in the guise of a vague light at the most distant end of the tunnel.

He [Kierkegaard] prefers to let consciousness circle about in the self's own dark labyrinth and communication passageways, without beginning or aim, hopelessly expecting hope[104] to flare up at the end of the most distant tunnel as the distant light of escape, rather than deluding himself with the *fata morgana* of static ontology in which the promises of an autonomous *ratio* are left unfulfilled. (KKA 32)

Hope therefore shines forth in a kind of way that is comparable to the vague light that radiates from the "Law".

The procedure is then repeated with regard to Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel: Kierkegaard's system of the spheres of existence mirrors Hegel's portrayal of the evolution of selfhood. Yet Kierkegaard differs from Hegel in that this evolution is no longer perceived as a continuous development that sublates contradictions within the self and between the self and its other, but as a "leap":

Differing from Hegel, however, contradiction is not sublated by the concept; rather, it remains as a sign of the brittleness of an existence from which ontological meaning is hidden. Total contradiction is called the "leap" [...]. (KKA 89)

According to Kierkegaard, the leap consists of the spiritual *sacrifice*[105] of the natural self. This, again, reflects the spiritualising character of Kierkegaard's works, which corresponds to the idealism of his times. Yet again, by *failing* to maintain this notion consistently, Kierkegaard's writings reveal the shortcomings of idealism. This applies particularly to one aspect of Kierkegaard's work that is highly important for this essay: the dying of the self. Adorno points out that Kierkegaard's theology of sacrifice suggests that one must perish in order to become oneself. (KKA 153)[106]

The annihilation of natural life, originating in the statue of the commander[107], is correctly understood as ghostly. For here it is not merely natural life that is destroyed by the spirit; spirit itself is annihilated natural life and bound to mythology. (KKA 109)

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[104] St. Paul's notion of "hope against hope" (Rom. 4,18) may be resounding in these words.

[105] Adorno points out that "sacrifice is the dialectical structure of his œuvre" (KKA 115).

[106] As we have seen, "The sickness unto Death" does not maintain this view (see above note 39); but its overall intention is similar in so far as Anti-Climacus demands that the self be "broken" (SD 65 = SV₁ XI 177).

[107] Adorno is referring to Kierkegaard's adaptation of the closing scene of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Don Juan.

The self is subjected to disaster due to the aporetic nature of Kierkegaard's spiritualising account of selfhood. But disaster releases hope for being otherwise. This is why those passages in Kierkegaard's writings that are straightforwardly immersed in despair mark a climax of Kierkegaard's œuvre.

Its [shattered melancholy's] ruins are the ciphers on which Kierkegaard reflects, and hope is integral to the absurdity of its desire. The order of the spheres is inverted. There where Kierkegaard supposes only the discontinuity and contingency of total melancholy, the natural impulse, even if denied fulfilment, clings to the names of its objects; in his philosophy hope nowhere insists more stubbornly than in the aesthetic "Diapsalmata," whose fragmentariness, according to Kierkegaard's hierarchy of spheres, results from the incapacity of the aesthetic to achieve continuity. (KKA 124)[108]

This passage clears the way for a differentiated account for Adorno's understanding of "aesthetics". Hope inheres in the *unfulfilled* images that reflect the reconciliation between the outer, nature, and the inner, spirit, which Kierkegaard is unable to express in propositional discourse:

Nature and reconciliation communicate in melancholy; from it the "wish" arises dialectically, and its illusion is the reflection of hope [...]. The sphere of the aesthetic, which Kierkegaard, employing the categories of his paradoxical system of existence, the speculative deception of objective metaphysics, and the subjective *how* of communication – just to be able to discard it as discontinuous; this sphere, painfully furrowed by a subjectivity that leaves its traces behind in it without ever mastering it, receives the structure from images that are present for the wish, without having been produced by it, for the wish itself originates in them. The realm of images constitutes the absolute opposite of the traditional Platonic realm. (KKA 127)

The sphere of the aesthetic, which is a posture of existence and not to be confused with the theory of art, reveals hope in a way which is itself of interest to aesthetics as theory of art: The aesthetic form of the descriptions of the aesthetic posture releases images; these images reveal a longing that is inscribed in this posture but cannot be expressed directly. The impossibility of direct expression, again, is due to Kierkegaard's entrapment in romantic idealism, which systematically excluded true reconciliation of nature and spirit by absolutising the latter. This logic of the aesthetic function of the aesthetic realm amounts to a logic of constructive destruction: the *fragmentariness* of existence is the last remaining means for the aesthetic "construction" of hope in averse conditions.

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[108] See also KKA 139: "Therefore it is no the total self and its total structure, but exclusively the fragment of collapsing existence, free of all subjective 'meaning', that is a sign of hope." On the disclosing character of despair see also Adorno (1951), 308.

3.4. The logic of constructive destruction in the context of Adorno's œuvre

Having elaborated the logic of constructive destruction in Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard, I will briefly consider other references to this logic in Adorno's writings in order to see how broadly this idea extends within Adorno's œuvre. In his interpretation of Kafka, Adorno writes about the function of the aesthetic in contrast to the "symbol":

> If the term of "symbol" within the aesthetic (a term that is uncanny) should have any significant meaning at all, then it can only be as follows: the individual elements of the artwork point beyond themselves by the force of their context, so that their totality can be integrated in meaning without any loss. Nothing could be more inadequate with respect to Kafka [...]. Every sentence stands there in its literal cast, every [individual] sentence has a meaning [by itself]. They [the individual sign and meaning] are not fused as the concept of symbol suggests. They fall apart, out of their abyss glares the ray of fascination.[109]

The idea that meaning evolves in the gap between the literal meaning of the word and its "actual" meaning has been the horizon of Adorno's "Construction of the Aesthetic", which counters conceptions of art that see art as synthesis (i.e., synthesis of form and content).

> Art is not synthesis, as convention holds, it shreds synthesis by the same force that affects synthesis.[110]

In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno modulates this idea once more:

> The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility – the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one. But no matter how hard we try for linguistic expression of such a history congealed in things, the words we use will remain concepts. Their precision substitutes for the thing itself, without quite bringing its selfhood to mind; there is a gap between words and the thing they conjure. [...] Benjamin's concepts still tend to an authoritarian concealment of their conceptuality. Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents. Cognition is a τρώσας ἰάσεται.[111]

This important passage is particularly hard to understand. The claim that the objects are "cheated" amounts to Adorno's often repeated observation that the reified world devours any particularity. In Kierkegaard, idealism has taken over the metaphors; "history is congealed" in them. But this catastrophe of language can not be fought from any standpoint outside of language; the wound must be healed with the same instrument that has struck the wound in the first place ([ὁ] τρώσας ἰάσεται[112]).

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[109] Adorno (1997a), 255.
[110] Adorno (1997), 139. In his "Minima Moralia", Adorno suggests that the destruction of art is its salvation (Adorno (1951), 132).
[111] Benjamin's concepts still tend to an authoritarian concealment of their conceptuality. Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents. Cognition is a τρώσας ἰάσεται. Adorno (1973), 53.
[112] There exists an antique folklore belief that assumes that the wound must be healed by the weapon that struck it. Collard comments on Apollodorus, Epit 3,20 (which tells of the healing of Telephos

Adorno's analysis, which exhibits *how and that* reality cheats the objects is a means to do that. But analysis can do nothing but turning that which is already there against itself – this shows how close Adorno is to deconstruction.[113]

As it has been the case for millennia, Kafka is searching for redemption by incorporating the power of the enemy.[114]

3.5.   Summary: Suffering and aesthetics

Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard enacts a logic of constructive destruction: Kierkegaard' works 'fail', but they do so in a meaningful kind of way.[115] Adorno rarely refers to *suffering* in his reading of Kierkegaard, but the kind of interpretation that he enacts could provide a model for the overcoming of suffering. Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard's writings is a constructive destruction on a communicative level: Kierkegaard's writings both deconstruct themselves (and one another)[116] and simultaneously illumate the shortcomings of their age and the hope for redemption. It is this mechanism of constructive destruction that we will now explore by reading Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem and Philip Roth.

The logic of constructive destruction is laid bare by an analysis of what Adorno calls the "construction of the aesthetic", which in fact should be called the constructive auto-deconstruction of the aesthetic. The aesthetic "as such" falls under the verdict of lure and ornamentation. Adorno strictly opposes a reading that accepts Kierkegaard's propositions and hails the splendour of their form. Instead, Adorno wants to show how the aesthetic cast of Kierkegaard's writings subverts the claims that apparently are meant to be endorsed by the aesthetic, hence I call this working of the text a "constructive auto-deconstruction of the aesthetic".

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from the rust of the spear with which he was struck): "The cure of the wound by an application to it of rust from the weapon which inflicted the hurt is [...] clearly a folklore remedy based on the principle of sympathetic magic (Collard (1995), 51; see Preiser (2000), 277; Preiser (2001), 375, note 944, with references to Plato's Gorgias (Plato (1983)), 447b; I do not see, though how the word "curing" in this passage relates to the idea of [ό] τρώσας ίάσεται). Collard refers to Frazer (1921), 51, who lists further examples of this believe. – In his Minima Moralia, Adorno refers to a similar idea: "The usuriousness of the healthy is as such always already the sickness. Its antidote is the sickness as recognised sickness, the delimitation of life itself." (Adorno (1951), 136 [= aphorism 40, translation my own]) "Dialectical thinking is the attempt to break the coercive character of logic by means of its own devices." (Adorno (1951), 284 [= aphorism 98, translation my own].

[113] See Schmidt (2006), 49.

[114] Adorno (1997a), 285 (translation my own). Adorno must be thinking of the following entry: "To use the horse of the offender for one's own ride. Only possibility. But what power and acumen that requires!" (T 359); see Brändle (1984), 30. Kafka's literary strategy is also linked with the idea that wounds take an active part in the process of healing: "Rather than healing neuroses, Kafka searches for the healing power within these, i.e., the power of cognition: the wounds that society burns into the individual are being read as ciphers of the untruth of society, as the negative [image] of truth." (Adorno (1997a), 262 [translation my own])

[115] It is only in his later writings that Adorno explained more thoroughly in which respect such a literary strategy corresponds to a communicative *necessity* (see above note 90).

[116] See Schmidt 2006.

Finally we must ask more pointedly: What does Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard imply for a reflection about *suffering* that is located at the crossroad of theology, philosophy and literature?[117] Adorno shows that decay can illuminate redemption.[118] The remainder of this essay will exhibit further guises of the illuminative qualities of decay. As regards aesthetics, the import is less exciting than one may have expected. Adorno's book is not *about* aesthetics, and Adorno never contrasts his understanding of aesthetics to "the poetic", which he discharges.[119] Eventually, what Adorno says about Kierkegaard applies to Adorno as well: Every insight into Adorno is to be wrung out of his own context.[120] Adorno was himself trapped in his own negativism. He condemned the culture of his age on the whole; Kierkegaard's writings are seen as the evolution of the contemporary catastrophe of culture. I disagree with this reading in so far as redemption should not be *restricted* to the negation of what there is, lest life be turned into an endless deferral. Adorno's negativistic thought ought to be counterbalanced with a careful attempt to appreciate life, i.e., the life that we do have. But in spite of this correction that I would suggest, the structure of Adorno's reading is vibrant. We will now turn to Kafka, particularly to Gershom Scholem's reading of Kafka, where we will find similar motives.

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[117] The present study does not rehearse Adorno's explicit analyses of suffering. These have been severely criticised for being rather undifferentiated; see Geuss (2005), 129f.

[118] Adorno has inherited this idea from Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer (see Wiggershaus (1998), 30).

[119] See above note 91.

[120] See KKA 13: "Every insight into Kierkegaard is to be wrung out of his own context."

4.Su ffering more recently: Franz Kafka, the untimely Sabbatianist

The following reading will focus on the motive of constructive destruction with reference to Kafka. The diversity of theoretical approaches to Kafka is so great that it was claimed no other corpse of writing had received as much attention as Kafka's writings did and had been interpreted in such a great variety of different ways.[142] In what follows, I start from one particular approach to Kafka, namely that of Maurice Blanchot, for Blanchot is focussed on aspects of Kafka's works that are pivotal for this essay.[143] I will then continue to explore Gershom Scholem's reading of Kafka, for Scholem (implicitly) links Kafka constructive destruction.

4.1.   Kafka, theology, Kierkegaard

4.1.1.   Blanchot on Kafka: Writing of disaster

Maurice Blanchot lays particular emphasis on the notion of *reversal* in his reading of Kafka in "The Space of Literature".

There is no denying that distress is his element. It is his abode and his "time." But this distress is never without hope. This hope is often only the torment of distress – which does not give hope, but prevents one from getting enough even of despair and determines that "condemned to die, one is also condemned to defend oneself right up to the last" – and perhaps at that point assigned to *reverse* condemnation into deliverance.[144]

This remark on Kafka's "reversal" attributes to it the power to raise Kafka to heights that other people can only sense – one could feel reminded of Kierkegaard's discourse on the "thorn in the flesh."[145] And yet Blanchot is aware that the working of the negative in Kafka is highly complex and sublime, for the outcome of the work is utterly incalculable.

Few texts are more somber, yet even those whose outcome is without hope remain ready to be reversed to express an ultimate responsibility, an unknown triumph, the shining forth of an unrealizable claim. By fathoming the negative, he gives it the chance to become positive, but only a chance, a chance whose opposite keeps showing through and that is never completely fulfilled.[146]

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[142] Matt (1999), 305, see Jahraus / Neuhaus 2002, 28.

[143] On Blanchot's reading of Kafka see Jasper (2004), 163f.

[144] Blanchot (1982), 270: "Deprivation of the world is reversed, becoming a positive experience, that of another world where Kafka is already a citizen, where, granted, he is only the littlest and most anxious, but where he also knows staggering heights and enjoys a freedom whose value other men sense."

[145] [...] With the help of the thorn in my foot I leap higher than anyone with feet in the best condition." (JP 6011 = Pap. VII A 156 [1847]).

[146] Blanchot (1995), 7.

What makes Blanchot's comments particularly interesting for this essay is the fact that he relates reversal to a dialectics of loss and gain, for this very same logic has been instantiated by the Lurianic Kabbalah. Blanchot describes the dialectics of loss and gain as follows:

> What he has to win is his own loss, the truth of exile and the way back into the heart of dispersion. This struggle can be compared to the profound Jewish speculations, when, especially after the expulsion from Spain, religious minds tried to overcome exile by pushing it to its limits.[147]

Blanchot also relates Kafka to Jewish mysticism with respect to the dialects of loss and gain in his essay "Kafka and Literature."

> Literature [...] becomes an 'assault on the frontiers,' a hunt that, by the opposing forces of solitude and language, leads us to the extreme limit of this world, 'to the limits of what is generally human.' One could even dream of seeing it develop into a new Cabala, a new secret doctrine from centuries ago that could recreate itself today and begin to exist starting from, and beyond, itself [...]. The ancient idea from the Cabala, in which our downfall seems our salvation and vice versa, perhaps lets us understand why art can succeed where knowledge fails: because it is and is not true enough to become the way, and too unreal to change into an obstacle. [Art] destroys itself while it survives.[148]

This reference to the Kabbalah is particularly vibrant as Blanchot draws a connection between Kafka's aphorism that inspired the title of this essay and the notion of Kabbalah.

> How can one destroy, when destruction is the same as that which it destroys or even, like the living magic[149] of which Kafka speaks, when destruction does not destroy, but constructs? [...] So Art is the place of anxiety and complacency, of dissatisfaction and security. It has a name: self-destruction, infinite disintegration. And another name: happiness, eternity.[150]

We will elaborate the link between constructive destruction and the Kabbalah shortly.[151] This analysis will be philosophical rather than aesthetic; therein it takes a different route from the one that Blanchot suggests. The reason is simply that Blanchot's vibrant, expressionistic sentences can hardly be *discussed* or tested, unlike the philosophical analysis of the relationship between Kafka and the Kabbalah.

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[147] Blanchot (1982), 70. Blanchot quotes from Scholem (1995), 250: " There was an ardent desire to break down the Exile by enhancing its torments, by savouring its bitterness to the utmost (even to the night of the Exile of the Shekhina itself)." Scholem is referring to the Lurianic Kabbalah.

[148] Blanchot (1995), 18f.

[149] Blanchot obviously refers to the aphorism from which I have borrowed the title of this study: There is an *enchantment* accompanying his [i.e., the aesthete's in Kierkegaard's "Either/Or" on which Kafka is here meditating – J.S.] argument of the case. One can escape from an argument into the world of magic, from an enchantment into logic, but both simultaneously are crushing, all the more since they constitute a third entity, a living magic or a destruction of the world that is not destructive but constructive." (WP 118 (emphasis mine)

[150] Blanchot (1995), 26.

[151] See p. 46ff.

This investigation of the religious dimension of Kafka's work against the backdrop of the (kabbalistic) idea of "constructive destruction" will (hopefully) be far more fecund than the rather abstract quest for 'Kafka's relation to Judaism/theology'. In order to be able to move beyond previous discussions of Kafka's relation to religion and theology in a competent kind of way, we must first of all acquaint ourselves with these.

4.1.2. Kafka, Theology, and Kierkegaard

One of the earliest and possibly the most prominent theological reading of Kafka had been attempted his friend Max Brod. Early on, Brod has received much criticism, particularly from Walter Benjamin, who found Brod's reading of Kafka so completely aberrant that he eventually said that the friendship of Brod and Kafka was not one of the smallest riddles of Kafka's life.[152] In his book "Despair and Redemption in Franz Kafka's Work", Max Brod proposes that Kafka's work holds fast to the ultimate meaningfulness of being in the face of crisis.[153] This claim is obviously hard to sustain, particularly as regards e.g. the ending of *The Trial*, where K. dies "like a dog".

A pointed criticism of theological readings of Franz Kafka can be found in a few remarks by Guattari and Deleuze, who forcefully point out that Kafka's works imply no transcendence. The "law", Guattari/Deleuze argue, is immanently senseless; nothing occasions the claim that the law was transcendent.[154] Guattari's and Deuleuze's critique should make the reader alert of inadequate theological appropriations of Kafka as "negative theology."[155] I would agree that Kafka's works *contain* rather few references to a transcendent realm. But this does mean to say that Kafka's works could not be meaningfully related to theological problems (in ways other than ethical).

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[152] Scholem (1989), 222f.

[153] Brod (1959), 23.

[154] "If the ultimate instances are inaccessible and cannot be represented, this occurs not as a function of an infinite hierarchy belonging to a negative theology but as a function of a *contiguity of desire* that causes whatever happens to happen always in the office next door." (Deuleuze / Guattari (1991), 50). See also op. cit., 44f.

[155] Kafka's work does show affinities to Christian mysticism. I will take up only one note that uses the metaphor of fire with which we have engaged ourselves in our brief look at Christian mysticism: In a letter to his confidante Grete Bloch, Kafka is pondering that there were "[...] only two kinds of pure, tearless happiness, touching the very limits of our strength: to have a person who is true to one, to whom one is true; and secondly to be true to oneself and spend oneself utterly, *burn oneself up without leaving any ashes*. (LF 533f. [emphasis mine]) This metaphor obviously resembles Meister Eckhart's and St. John of the Cross's words (see above section 1.3.1). But Kafka's writings operate in totally different circumstances. The laboring of the negative is observed by all three of these thinkers, but Kafka lacks the sense that this laboring is embedded in a narrative that is heading for a good end. Although Kafka is deeply concerned with a negativity that motions towards positivity, he has lost the faith in either Jewish or Christian traditions that guarantee the eventual meaningfulness of suffering and negativity, the progress of history and the successful dialects of the self. This possibility of burning oneself up without leaving ashes is an utterly theoretical possibility for Kafka; it is a demand that cannot be fulfilled.

Recent interpretations of Kafka have been equally hesitant to attribute particular religious dimensions to them. I will briefly comment on Ritchi Robertson's reading of Kafka.[156] Ritchie Robertson entitles his chapter about Kafka's aphorisms *Reflections from Damaged life*, borrowing the subtitle from Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*[157]. This silent reference is worth looking at more closely. The fact that the reference to Adorno remains implicit is characteristic in so far as Robertson himself avoids any dialectical sort of thinking and rather relies on a plain, humanistic and conservative ideal of (domestic) human life.[158] Critical theory intrudes into Robertson's book again when Robertson claims in the subsequent chapter that "[p]hilosophers like Schopenhauer interpreted the world, Kafka wants to change it."[159] The Zürau-aphorisms, Robertson proposes, reflect Kafka's search for new foundations that are to replace the religious foundations, which have become obsolete.[160] Certainly it is true that Kafka was very concerned with the possibility of leading a "conventional" life, yet it is obvious that he was interested in this question in a very *solipsistic* kind of way. His very *personal* incompetence at matrimony and its causes and implications concerned him. Although recent research on Kafka has suggested that Kafka did show some interest in the political situation of his times[161], overall he remains a solipsistic thinker whose journal entries and letters are rarely concerned with the foundations of the society. It is therefore dubious whether Kafka aimed for the improvement of humanity and adapted "religious imagery" to that purpose, as Robertson suggests.[162]

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[156] Robertson (1985).

[157] Adorno (1974).

[158] "... The first of many signs that the proper object for his efforts is not the Castle but integration into domestic life." (Robertson (1985) 243; see also op. cit. 268ff.)

[159] Roberston (1985) 219. See Marx 11th thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." (Marx / Engels (1984), 286) Marx' statement is taken up by Adorno, who agrees with its content and directs it against the existing philosophy of his times: "The summary judgement that [philosophy] had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried." (Adorno (1973), 3)

[160] "Being wholly deprived of the shelter of a religious community, he has to start building from scratch, and such a task, though not unique in kind, may well be unique in its magnitude. The task is accomplished through the aphorisms: in them Kafka ponders the last things in order to establish the principles on which the new community of the future must be founded." (Robertson (1985), 191; see also 215: "[...] [T]he aphorisms are the circuitous path that leads Kafka to this neighbour."

[161] Stach (2004), 531ff. et. al.

[162] "Religion is not an illusion, as Freud thought, since for Kafka the religious impulse is essential to humanity; but it must always be under an illusion. Hence the imagery of religion is valid as the expression of the religious impulse, but misleading as an interpretation of that impulse. Kafka is therefore debarred from making any such straightforward use of religious imagery as he found in Maimonides and his other source: he can only use religious imagery with qualifications. One method of qualifying it is the eclecticism that we noted in *Der Prozeß*. If Kafka uses a religious image, he must promptly deny its claim to privileged authority by following it with an image from a different tradition." (Roberston (1985), 241) B. Hawkins takes a very similar approach: "Ultimately, each [i.e., Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, and Edmond Jabès] will reject this kind of God – as a reality – and opt instead for an ethics originating from humanity, an ethics that persists in spite the nonexistence of a personal, saving, speaking God. At most, God can be accepted as a necessary illusion, a voluntary deception to the production of ethics." (Hawkins (2003), xxviii.)

The burden of this study will be to look at Kafka's work, its theological valences and its implications for the understanding of suffering in a way that is more differentiated than the approach that Robertson takes. Robert Alter takes a much more careful approach by acknowledging that Kafka remained bound to tradition even though the mode in which he did so may be strongly problematic. Kafka's negativity, again, always has an inclination to capsize into the positive, as Blanchot has pointed out. Kafka's relation to the reversal of the negative into the positive is highly complex, for he – like Benjamin and Scholem – fully exposes himself to historical circumstances that are averse to any attempt to "recover" Judaism.[163] For all three thinkers, Alter points out,

[...] [T]here can be no real return to origins, where God once stood now stands melancholy.[164]

The significance of this substitution will be discussed shortly. But before that, I will make a few comments on Kafka's relation to Kierkegaard; after we have acquainted ourselves with Kierkegaard's references to negative experiences, the question ought to be mentioned how Kierkegaard relates to Kafka in view of the notion of the reversal of the negative into the positive. Again, a comprehensive account of the countless links between Kierkegaard and Kafka would exceed what can be done in the present study[165]; I will only give one example.

In his study on Kierkegaard and Kafka, Fritz Billeter compares the form of Kafka's and Kierkegaard's writings on a somewhat abstract level. Interestingly, he does refer to the aphorism that inspired the title of this essay when he points out that for Kafka,

writing poetry does not mean to stir oneself but to devour oneself, thus writing is turned into a means of mystic destruction, which is constructive. ("Es wird ihm zum Mittel mystischer Zerstörung, welche aufbauend ist").[166]

Yet Billeter does not interpret this idea of constructive destruction at all, and he hardly draws a connection between Kierkegaard's and Kafka's accounts for the *necessity* of negativity.

The "gateway" for any discussion of Kafka's relation to Kierkegaard, one of the most often cited of all of Kafka's aphorisms, shall be looked at before we move on to consider some of Kafka's negativistic ideas. Kafka positions himself in relation to (amongst others) Kierkegaard as follows.

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[163] "Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem variously launched on a daring experiment in the recovery of Judaism under historical circumstances that made such an undertaking difficult, ambiguous, fraught with spiritual dangers, perhaps unfeasible." (Alter (1991), 22)

[164] Alter (1991), 19.119.

[165] On Kafka and Kierkegaard see also Gray / Gross / Goebel (2005), 159f.; Billeter (1965); Adorno somewhat obscurely remarks that "Kafka was a diligent reader of Kierkegaard, but belongs to existential philosophy only in so far as one speaks of "annihilated existences" (Adorno (1951), 431 [aph. 143]).

[166] Billeter (1965), 97.

I have brought nothing with me of what life requires, so far as I know, but only the universal human weakness. With this – in this respect it is a gigantic strength – I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were a right to represent.

The slight amount of the positive, and also of the extreme negative, which capsizes into the positive, are something in which I have had no *inherited* share. I have not been guided into life by the hand of Christianity – admittedly now slack and failing – as Kierkegaard was, and have not caught the hem of the Jewish prayer shawl – now flying away from us – as the Zionists have. I am end or beginning.[167]

Kafka can theoretically understand the idea of progress of history (Zionism) and of the successful dialects of the self (already "slack and failing" in Kierkegaard), and yet he feels debarred from traditions that have faith in that the negative will capsize into the positive. He is disinherited from traditions whose ideas he can grasp intellectually, but not appropriate.

This does not, however, mean that Kafka was denying a progression of the negative towards the positive altogether. On the contrary, Kafka's aphorisms circle around the radical dialectical possibility that the negative ruptures for the sake of the positive. Such a rupturing, for Kafka, is utterly incalculable, and its result is unforeseeable.

4.1.3. Constructive Destruction as reversal

This intermingling of construction and destruction has been at the horizon of this entire study. The title of my work is inspired by the following entry from Kafka's aphorisms:

There is an enchantment accompanying his argument of the case. One can escape from an argument into the world of magic, from an enchantment into logic, but both simultaneously are crushing, all the more since they constitute a third entity, a living magic or a destruction of the world that is not destructive but constructive.[166]

Recourses to this statement in Kafka-research interpret the text as a reflection about (Kierkegaard's) literary strategy. In his book "Constructive Destruction", a study of the aphoristic form of Kafka's work, Richard T. Gray comments with respect to the title of his work that it refers both to the form and to the content. Aphoristic discourse, Gray points out, is a means of expression in which

self-critique and self-projection productively interrelate to produce a "constructive destruction" of the self, i.e. dismantling and reconstruction of the self accomplished through a specific textual medium.[169]

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[167] WP 114 (emphasis mine).
[168] WP 118.
[169] Gray (1987). In her master-thesis "Aufbauende Zerstörung" ("*Constructive Destruction*"), Kolesch conceives of "aufbauende Zerstörung" as an auto-deconstruction of the text (Kolesch (1996), 56).

Gray then indicates that this process of constructive destruction occurs by means of textualisation. The emphasis of Gray's work consequentially lies on the form of the aphorisms.

In what follows I will try to credit the *content* more than Gray did. Constructive destruction is first all an existential necessity that Kafka talks of in a rather straightforward language:

> Know yourself does not mean: observe yourself. Observe yourself is the word of the serpent. It means: Make yourself the master of your acts. The word therefore means: Miscomprehend yourself! Destroy yourself! Namely something bad, and only if you kneel deeply, you also hear the good, which says: "in order to make yourself what you are."[170]

> In order to avoid a word-mistake: What shall be destroyed actively must be held in view and in hand tightly before. "If ... you must die" means: Recognition is both at the same time: A step to eternal life and an obstacle from it. If you desire to achieve eternal life after successful recognition – and you will have no other option but wanting to, for recognition is this will – then you will have to destroy yourself, the obstacle, in order to *construct* the step, i.e., *destruction*. The banishment from paradise was not an act, but an event.[171]

In order to understand the (possible) biographic background of Kafka's deliberations about necessary negativity and indeed suffering, I will explore a few texts where Kafka summarised his existential ailment. In 1915, Kafka summarises his ailment in a letter to Felice as follows:

> My suffering is fourfold:
> I cannot live in Prague. I don't know if I can life elsewhere, but that I cannot live here is the most definite thing I know.
> Furthermore: This why I cannot have F. at present.
> Furthermore: I cannot help (it is even in print) admiring other people's children.
> Finally: At times I feel I shall be crushed by these torments on every side. But my present suffering is not the worst. The worst is that time passes, that this suffering makes me more wretched and incapable, and prospects for the future grow increasingly more dismal.[172]

The reason why Kafka cannot live with Felice is ultimately located in his literary work that he felt unable to abandon. He describes his life as being torn back and forth between two forces, one inclining towards Felice, the other, stronger force keeping him with his work. The only help for him would be destruction / shattering.

> In me there have always been, and still are, two selves wrestling with each other. One of them is very much as you would wish him to be, and by further development he could achieve the little he lacks in order to fulfil your wishes. None of the things you reproached me with at the Askanische Hof applied to him. The other self, however, thinks of nothing but work, which is his sole concern; it has the effect of making even the meanest thoughts appear quite normal; the death of his dearest friend would seem to be no more than a hindrance – if only a temporary one – to his work; this meanness is compensated for by the fact that he is also capable of suffering for his work. These two selves are locked in combat, but it is no ordinary fight where two pairs of fists strike each other. The first self is dependent on the

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[170] Kafka, KA.

[171] Kafka, KA, 78 (translation my own; emphasis mine).

[172] LF 583.

second; he would never, for inherent reasons never, be able to overpower him; on the contrary, he is delighted when the second succeeds, and if the second appears to be losing the first will kneel at his side, oblivious to everything but him. This his how it is, Felice. And yet they are locked in combat, and yet they could be yours; the trouble is that they cannot be changed unless both were to be destroyed.[173]

The last words contain what could be the most concise expression of the dilemma that Kafka faced: The only possible way to salvation would lead through destruction, and this would need to be a kind of destruction the end of which would remain incalculable. This means that destruction would need to be embarked, while the aim of the destruction may not be anticipated.

I shall take a brief detour in order to emphasis how profound such a movement is, and how closely it links with contemporary ideas. The paradoxical situation of a subject reminds one of Lévinas's and Derrida's discourses on the "gift".[174] A pure gift of the other, Lévinas and Derrida both argue, would be an event where something occurs that is beyond intentionality, for as soon as a subject beholds a gift, it is inscribed in the circle of exchange. Phenomenologically speaking, a pure receptiveness towards alterity can only occur if the subject is being devoured, while in this very process, something falls out of the decay and remains. Kafka enacts this very logic in his aphorisms on dying:

One of the first signs of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will only in time come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: "This man is not to be locked up again. He is to come with me."[175]

And another passage reads:

I gave orders for my horse to be brought around from the stable. The servant did not understand me. I myself went to the stable, saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance I heard a bugle call. I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me, asking: "Where are you riding to, master?" "I don't know," I said, "only away from here, away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination." "And so you know your destination?" He asked. "Yes," I answered, didn't I say so? Away-From-Here, that is my destination." "You have no provision with you," he said. "I need none," I said, "the journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I

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[173] LF 564.

[174] Derrida (1994). This problem emerges even before Marcel Mauss' essay on the gift (Mauss (2001)), Derrida's primary reference, was published, i.e. in Friedrich Nietzsche (see Tugendhat (2004), 38f.) and Georg Simmel (1892f.), 85ff. – A more thorough exploration of Derrida's possible contribution to this essay would inquire the links particularly between Derrida and Adorno's "negative dialectics". See the survey of this discussion in de Vries (2005), xvii, who points to the work of Jürgen Habermas on this question. Derrida and Adorno meet particularly in their critique of "automatic" understanding (see Adorno's critique of the "symbol" above) and their insistence on the deferment of understanding, its irreducible dependence on temporal and potentially aesthetic processes. See Menke (1991), 191 et. al.

[175] WP 39. – Further discussion of this passage would include Kafka's meditations on the "Hunter-Gracchus" motif, see Kröck (1974).

don't get anything on the way. No provisions can save me. For it is, unfortunately, a truly immense journey."[176]

Both passages are similar in structure: In either text a journey from here to "there" is embarked. The journey will not lead to a desirable end, except for the occurrence of an incalculable event: The master must come along the corridor; a provision of a kind that "you can't take with you" must be found." The aphorism can be read as a model for the process of mortification. Mortification, which does not *know* that death is a "good investment"[177], can only be motivated by an *unattainable* hope, i.e., a kind of hope that in no way has access to its own fulfilment. Mortification is then accompanied by a hope against hope, as it were, that in the process of mortification, an incalculable event should occur. On a different level, we will find a similar logic in Scholem's reading of Kafka.

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[176] BK 185.

[177] See Derrida (1978). On "mortification" see Alitzer (1997), 152; on the "mors mystica" see Haas (1979); Wagner-Egelhaaf (1989), 18.

4.2. Scholem about Kafka: The meaning of negativity

4.2.1. Collapse and nothingness

In what follows, I will give a brief account of Gershom Scholem's reading of Kafka. This reading was mainly developed in the correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. The first plot in Scholem's and Benjamin's exchange about the theological dimension of Kafka's[178] work refers to the question how Kafka's "failure" ought to be evaluated. Benjamin has recourse to Kafka's last will that his writings be destroyed after his death. In this, Benjamin sees a sign of Kafka's failure.

> He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into doctrine, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him to be the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment 'Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image' so faithfully.[179]

In relation to this assumption that Kafka's attempt had been a failure, Benjamin remarks at a different instance that Kafka's work amounted to a tradition falling ill.

> Kafka eavesdropped on tradition, and he who listens hard does not see. [...] The main reason why this eavesdropping demands such effort is that only the most indistinct sounds reach the listener. There is no doctrine that one could learn and no knowledge that one could preserve. The things one wishes to catch as they rush by are not meant for anyone's ears. This implies a state of affairs that negatively characterizes Kafka's works with great precision. (Here a negative characterisation probably is altogether more fruitful than a positive one). Kafka's work represents tradition falling ill. Wisdom has sometimes been defined as the epic side of truth. Such a definition marks wisdom off as a property of tradition; it is the truth in its aggadic consistency. It is this consistency of truth that has been lost. [...] Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its aggadic element.[180]

Regarding this interpretative perspective on Kafka's relation to tradition, Scholem articulates his own interpretation of negativity in Kafka.

> It seems to me that the way of looking at things you've taken is exceptionally worthwhile and promising. But I would like to understand what you take to be Kafka's fundamental

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[178] I am here referring to a thematic complex, not to a chronological section. On the chronology of Scholem's engagement with Kafka see Mosès (1992), 190ff. -- Kafka and Scholem never met, Kafka had heard of Scholem (B 2 231, Sept. 1916 to Felice Bauer), yet Scholem learned about this only in retrospect (Scholem (1977), 86).

[179] Benjamin (1986b), 125. Benjamin emphasises the meaning of Kafka's failure again in a later letter: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of failure. The circumstances are manifold. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure. His friendship with Brod [who faded that aspect out – J.S.] is to me above all else a question mark which he chose to ink in the margin of his life [...]." Scholem (1989), 226.

[180] Scholem (1989), 224.

failure, which you virtually embed at the heart of your reflections. You really seem to understand this failure as something unexpected or bewildering, whereas the simple truth [is] that the failure was the object of endeavors that, if they were to succeed, would be bound to fail. Surely that can't have been what you meant. Did he express what he wanted to say? Of course. The antinomy of the aggadic you mention is not specific to the Kafkaesque Aggada alone; rather it is grounded in the nature of the aggadic itself.[181]

The illness of tradition is by no means an accident or a coincidence. Tradition, thus Scholem, has to pass through seasons respectively storms, in which there are moments of descent.

Does this opus really represent "tradition falling ill" in your sense? I would say such an enfeebling is rooted in the nature of the mystical tradition itself: it is only natural that the *capacity* of tradition to be transmitted remains as its sole living feature when it decays, when it is on the crest of a wave. I believe I have already written you something along the same line in connection with discussions on Kafka. I don't know how many years it must be since I made notes, in the context of my studies, on questions such as the mere possibility of transmissibility, and I would like very much to hunt them out again. It seems to me to emerge in the context of the question about the "essence" of the righteous, the type of the "saint" evident in a decaying Jewish mysticism. – That wisdom is a property of tradition is entirely true, of course: it has the essential unconstructability of all the possessions that inhere in tradition. It is *wisdom* that, when it reflects, comments rather than perceives. If you were to succeed in representing the borderline case of wisdom, which Kafka indeed does represent, as the crisis of the sheer transmissibility of truth, you would have achieved something truly magnificent. This commentator does indeed have Holy Scriptures, but he has lost them. Thus the question is: What can he comment upon? I take it that you would be able to answer these questions within the perspectives you expounded. But why "failure" – since he *really* did comment, if only on the nothingness of truth or whatever might emerge there? So much for Kafka [...].[182]

Failure thus is an inherent necessity of tradition[183] – a thought that is tightly linked to Scholem's studies in Jewish mysticism. In his "Ten unhistorical sentences about Kabbalah", Scholem writes:

Real tradition remains obscure; only decaying tradition falls onto its object and becomes discernable only in its decay.[184]

The reason for the obscurity of tradition, thus says Scholem (from the orbit of negative theology)[185] is that there is an absolute beginning in tradition that is not depicted in human language, for language always diversifies. The closer tradition approximates this absolute beginning, the more visible becomes its divergence from it. Scholem also addresses the thought of a meaningful decay of tradition in the

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[181] Scholem (1989), 236.

[182] Scholem (1989), 236f.

[183] It is worth noting that this negativity of tradition that Scholem describes could be related to the Christian notion of kenosis and thus to the content of (Christian) tradition.

[184] Scholem (1973), 264. On Scholem and Tradition, see also Scholem (1977), 54ff.

[185] Scholem himself has been designated as a "negative theologian". See Hamacher (1999), 168; see also op. cit., 42. Scholem said of himself that he was not a negative theologian however (op. cit., 60); see also Biale (1979), 109.

concluding words of his depiction of the history of Jewish mysticism. Here, he retells the following story:

> When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer – and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the "Maggid" of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers – and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs – and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.[186]

Scholem comments that his story could be read as the description of the decay of a great movement – yet this decay is not an endpoint of tradition, but a dialectical moment in its historical evolution.

> You can say if you will that his profound little anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement. You can also say that it reflects the transformation of all its values, a transformation so profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale. That is the position in which we find ourselves today, or in which Jewish mysticism finds itself. The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me.

In the situation of the decay of a great movement there remains nothing but the narrative of this decay, i.e., a narrative that accounts for the impossibility of performing the rite anymore. Kafka articulates this decay[187], yet precisely by doing this, he remains in continuity with this tradition, no matter how vigorously he denies its contents. Kafka represents tradition as decaying respectively as decayed. But the decay of tradition is still a moment in the unfolding of tradition, and to sink into the contemporary decay of tradition may be the only means to maintain continuity with tradition. The decay of tradition is distinct from its final exitus in so far as the history of the decay itself can be told, which means that the relation to the tradition is not erased. Thus, the decay itself becomes readable as a moment in the history of tradition.[188]

The relation of tradition and the loss of tradition become more apparent in a second aspect of the conflict between Scholem and Benjamin that focuses on Benjamin's claim that K's "assistants" are like students who had lost the

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[186] Scholem (1995), 350.

[187] See Mosès (1992), 207.

[188] This notion again is designated by an enormous tension that can be found in the whole of Scholem's and Benjamin's discussion of Kafka: The negativity of the *time* that is reflected in Kafka's, Scholem's and Benjamin's work is an abyss that may not be transfigured as an element of a *general* hermeneutic key.

scriptures.[189] In Scholem's differentiating comment on Benjamin's statement, the thin line between an utter loss of meaning on the one hand and a conservation of meaning in the midst of decay on the other hand becomes apparent one more time. Scholem consents to the observation that the relation to scripture is fractured, and yet he describes this relation in a way quite different from Benjamin.

Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen of course from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness. I cannot accept your disavowal of this aspect – if I should really regard it as such, that is, and not just as a misunderstanding brought about by your polemics against Schoepsen and Bröder. The *nonfulfillability* of what has been revealed is the point where a *correctly* understood theology (as I, immersed in my Kabbalah, think, and whose expression you can find more or less responsibly formulated in that open letter to Schoeps you are familiar with) coincides most perfectly with that which offers the key to Kafka's work. Its problem is not, dear Walter, its *absence* in a preanimistic world, but the fact that it cannot be *fulfilled*. It is about this text that we will have to reach an understanding. Those pupils of whom you speak at the end are not so much those who have lost Scripture – even though a world in which that can happen is already not very Bachofen-like either! – but rather those students who cannot decipher it.[190]

Scholem differentiates between the 'nonfulfillability' ("*Unvollziehbarkeit*") of revelation and its absence. This issue correlates to the question whether scripture is *lost* or whether it is *unreadable*. The notion of a revelation that is not lost and yet unfulfillable shall be explored in more detail. Benjamin responds to this passage of Scholem that the question whether scripture was merely lost or whether it was unreadable was of no impact.[191] Yet Scholem insists that this question was indeed vital and that it was intimately related to his reading of Kafka.

You ask what I understand by the "nothingness of revelation"? I understand by it a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but not significance. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point[192] of its own content, so to speak. This is obviously a borderline case in the religious sense, and whether it can really come to pass is a very dubious point. I certainly cannot share your opinion that it doesn't matter whether the disciples have lost the "Scripture" or whether they can't decipher them, and I view this as one of the greatest mistakes you could have made. When I speak of the nothingness of revelation, I do so precisely to characterize the difference between these two positions.[193]

The "nothingness of revelation" is a state in which revelation, although being "valid", is unfulfillable. Accordingly, the grammatical construction "nothingness of revelation" is be perceived of as a *genitivus objectivus*: the nothingness is a

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[189] Benjamin (1986a), 135: "His assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer, his students are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ. Now there is nothing to support them on their 'untrammelled, happy journey.'"

[190] Scholem (1989), 126f.

[191] "Whether the pupils have lost [the Scripture] or whether they are unable to decipher it comes down to saying the same thing, because, without the key that belongs to it, the Scripture is not the Scripture, but life." (Scholem (1989), 135.

[192] It is worth noting that for Scholem, the "zero point" of language is lamentation; see Scholem (1995).

[193] Scholem (1989), 142.

nothingness that is left by God who is departing from the world[194] – by no means does the term "nothingness of revelation" imply that revelation has become nothing, or that there is nothing about revelation (*genitivus subjectivus*). The notion of the "unfullfillability of revelation", again, is intimately bound to the very possibility of tradition:

> We now face the problem of tradition as it presented itself to the Kabbalists. If the conception of revelation as absolute and meaning-giving but in itself meaningless is correct, then it must also be true that revelation will come to unfold its infinite meaning (which cannot be confined to the unique event of revelation) only in its constant relationship to history, the arena in which tradition unfolds. Theologians have described the word of God as the "absolutely concrete." But the absolutely concrete is, at the same time, the simply unfulfillable – it is that which in no way can be put into practice. The Kabbalistic idea of tradition is founded upon the dialectic tension of precisely this paradox: it is precisely the absoluteness that effects the unending reflections in the contingencies of fulfilment. Only in the mirrorings in which it reflects does revelation become practicable and accessible to human action as something concrete. There is no immediate, undialectic application of the divine word. If there were, it would be destructive.[195]

The nothingness of revelation corresponds to the meaninglessness of tradition, or more precisely: it corresponds to the "fact" that the Torah has become meaningless and yet reveals its meaning in this crisis of meaning.

Mysticism is the kind of labour that penetrates through to this nothingness. It foraminates the fragility of revelation within the world towards the primordial beginning, which is infinite being and infinite nothingness, as Scholem indicates in connection with his studies of Jewish[196] and Christian mysticism.[197] The nothing of revelation is, thus Mosès[198], the nothingness of the Torah. The Torah resembles a script that has become unreadable and thus meaningless. Just like nothingness is the negative origin of being[199], likewise "revelation, which has yet no specific meaning, is that in the word which gives an infinite wealth of meaning.[200] In his *On Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Scholem also refers to this notion with reference to Kafka.

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[194] See Wohlfarth (1995), 189.226.

[195] Scholem (1971), 296.

[196] Scholem refers to Plato's Timaeus. See Scholem (1970), 54; Plato's discourse moves back and forth between affirmative and negative terms for the ground of being (Plato (1972), *Tim* 48eff.).

[197] Scholem (1970), 89. In his poem on Kafka, Scholem writes: „Only so does revelation / Shine in the time that rejected you. / Only your nothingness is the experience / It is entitled to have of you." Scholem (1989), 124. Benjamin quotes this verse and comments: "I endeavoured to show how Kafka sought – on the other side of that 'nothingness,' in its inside lining, so to speak – to feel his way toward redemption. This implies that any kind of victory over that nothingness, as understood by the theological exegetes around Brod, would have been an abomination for him." (Scholem (1989), 129)

[198] Mosès (1992), 199; Mosès (1987), 13-34, 23.

[199] I am referring to the Lurianic Doctrina of Zimzum.

[200] Scholem (1971), 282-303, 295. The notion of a "language without meaning" reminds of Benjamin's essay "On Language as such and the Language of Human Beings": "*There is no such thing as a meaning of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity, i.e., something communicable per se.*" (Benjamin 1986, 320) On the influence of this essay on Scholem see Scholem (1986) 65 (I thank Christoph Balzer for alerting me to this passage); Hamacher (1999), 166f.; Biale (1979), 103ff. Adorno may also have adopted Benjamin's theology of language (see Wiggershaus (1998), 44.

The word of God must be infinite, or, to put it in a different way, the absolute word is as such meaningless, but it is *pregnant* with meaning. Under human eyes it enters into significant finite embodiments which mark innumerable layers of meaning. Thus mystical exegesis, this *new* revelation imparted to the mystic, has the character of a key. The key itself may be lost, but an immense desire to look for it remains alive. In a day when such mystical impulses seem to have dwindled to the vanishing point they still retain an enormous force in the books of Franz Kafka. And the same situation prevailed seventeen centuries ago in the Talmudic mystics, one of whom left us an impressive formulation of it. In his commentary on the Psalms, Origen quotes a 'Hebrew' scholar, presumably a member of the Rabbinic Academy of Caeserea, as saying that the Holy Scriptures are like a large house with many, many rooms, and that outside each door lies a key – but it is not the right one. To find the right keys that will open the doors – that is the great and arduous task. This story, dating from the height of the Talmudic era, may give an idea of Kafka's deep roots in the tradition of Jewish mysticism.[201]

Kafka's writings are therefore seen in connection with the inaccessibility of meaning that Talmudic mystics have commented on. The irreducible inaccessibility of meaning creates a space of undecidability between religion and nihilism.

[...] [M]any exciting thoughts had led me (in the years 1916-1918) ... to intuitive affirmation of mystical theses which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism. I later found (in Kafka) the most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line, an expression which, as a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka's writings in the halo of the canonical."[202]

This "precise distinction between religion and nihilism" shall be investigated in more detail; I will take Scholem's – controversial[203] – studies of Sabbatianism as a point of entry. Sabbatianism practices a negation of tradition without reserve, whereas this negation remains related to tradition – even though in a most sublime kind of way. As is generally the case in messianic movements to which Sabbatianism counts, at the heart lies the desire for the end of suffering.

The most basic kind of expectation [of messianic prophecy] is at the individual level: the person hopes for a messianic redemption from his or her own sufferings and lowly condition, or perhaps from a burden of sin. Each person with messianic beliefs wants to believe that whatever scenario ultimately plays out, he or she will be saved from the evil and suffering afflicting his or her life.[204]

I shall now investigate this intricate relationship between the negative and the positive more thoroughly.

4.2.2. Kafka and the "constructive destruction" of Sabbatianism

In what follows, I will interpret the idea that tradition was to have meaning in the midst of the decay of meaning. The phenomenon of a heretical Kabbalah (Scholem

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[201] Scholem (1969), 12.

[202] Biale (1979), 74-76; see Wohlfahrt (1995), 190; Alter (1995), 172; Biale (1985); see also Scholem (1971), 271.

[203] See the survery that Hamacher provides. See Hamacher (1999).

[204] Goldish (2004), 8f.

sees Sabbatianism as an instance of a heretical Kabbalah)[205] is related to the problem of the necessary collapse of tradition in so far as Sabbatianism is looked at as a prime example of the collapse of tradition. First of all, the background of the doctrines of Sabbatianism must become clear. The structure of the world, thus the basic assumption of orthodoxy and Sabbatian heresy, is being internally amended through the process of "tikkun", the restitution of all things, which envisions the role of Israel in the world as follows:

According to the recognized, orthodox interpretation, Israel has been dispersed among the nations in order that it may gather in from everywhere the sparks of the souls and divine light which are themselves dispersed and diffused throughout the world, and through pious acts and prayers "lift them up" from their respective prisons.[206] When this process is more or less complete, the Messiah appears and gathers the last sparks, thereby depriving the power of evil of the element through which it acts. The spheres of good and evil, of pure and impure, are from then on separated for all eternity.[207]

Sabbatians "adapt" the concept of the process of *Tikkun* by radicalising the vision of the Messia's descent into the (evil) world.

The heretic version of this doctrine [...] differs from the orthodox mainly in its conclusions: there are stages in the great process of *Tikkun*, more particularly its last and most difficult ones, when in order to liberate the hidden sparks from their captivity, or to use another image, in order to force open the prison doors from within, the Messiah himself must descend into the realm of evil.[208] [...] It can easily be seen how this doctrine satisfied those who thought they had experienced their own and the world's salvation in their inner consciousness and consequently demanded a solution of the contradiction between their experience and the continuation of Exile.[209] The apostasy of the Messiah is the fulfilment of

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[205] Scholem (1984), 163.

[206] Scholem elsewhere points out that this is the most important heritage that Hasidism has taken over from the Kabbalah. See Scholem (1971b), 238. It is worth noting that Scholem's critique of Buber's understanding of Hasidism expounded in this text brings up a point that is relevant for this study, as Scholem emphasis the irreducible negativity that is linked to the Hasidic adaption of this kabbalistic idea: "The teaching of the uplifting of the sparks through human activity does in fact mean that there is an element in reality with which man can and should establish a positive connection, but the exposure or realization of this element simultaneously *annihilates* reality, insofar as 'reality' signifies, as it does for Buber, the here and now. [...] [P]recisely in that act in which we let the hidden life shine forth we *destroy* the here and now, instead of – as Buber would have it – realizing it in its full concreteness." (Scholem (1971b), 240f.; second emphasis mine) Commenting on the meditative communion with the vitality of all created things in prayers, Scholem points out that "[t]he actual and final realization of such a communion has a destructive qualitiy." (Scholem (1971b), 242) The shortcoming of Buber's account is essentially that he suppresses the Platonic elements in Hasidism (Scholem (1971b), 241)

[207] Scholem (1995), 310f. See Scholem (1997), 132. On the historical conditions of the evolution of Sabbatianism see also Bloom (1975), 14; Idel (1998), 183.

[208] In another text, Scholem remarks that the fall of the messiah had been related to the suffering messiah who is depicted in Isaiah 53 (Scholem (1997), 138) – which creates a link to the New Testament understanding of Jesus Christ that may have been articulated against the backdrop of the tradition of the suffering messiah. It must be noted, though, that in contrast to the Christian tradition, the acts of the heretical messiah were *not* meant to be imitated (Scholem (1997), 140); they were seen as a necessary evil.

[209] See also Scholem (1973a) 691: "The various Sabbatian doctrines sought to bridge the gulf between the inner experience and the historic reality that was supposed to symbolize it." On the historical conditions of the evolution of Sabbatianism Kabbalah see also Bloom (1975), 14; Idel (1998), 183.

the most difficult part of his mission, for redemption implies a paradox which becomes visible only at the end, in its actual occurrence.[210]

The apostasy of the Messiah Sabbatai Sevi therefore succeeded in interpreting the conflict between a world of exile and a hope for redemption. In the person of the messiah, the clash between exile and hope climaxes. The paradox between religious symbolism and historical reality is transferred into religious symbolism itself. But this shift affects the whole Jewish belief-system. If the work of the Messiah must take a guise that is contrary to its aim, then the same must apply to any other aspect of Jewish belief, particularly to the understanding of the Torah: The logic of subversion must be transferred to the Torah, which means that the destruction of the Torah serves to unearth the true purpose of the Torah.[211]

What the Sabbatians call "the strange acts of the Messiah," have not only a negative aspect, from the point of view fo (*sic!*) the old order, but also a positive side, in so far as the Messiah acts in accordance with the law of a new world. If the structure of the world is intrinsically changed by the completion of the process of *Tikkun*, the Torah, the true universal law of all things, must also appear from then on under a different aspect. Its new significance is one that conforms with the primordial state of the world, now happily restored, while as long as the Exile lasts the aspect it presents to the believer naturally conforms to that particular state of things which is the *Galuth*. The Messiah stands at the crossing of both roads. He realizes in his Messianic freedom a new law, which from the point of view of the old order is purely subversive. It subverts the old order, and all actions which conform to it are therefore in manifest contradiction with the traditional values. In other words, redemption implies the destruction of those aspects of the Torah which merely reflect the *Galuth*, the Torah itself remains one and the same, what has changed is its relation to the mind.[212]

In this respect, the abolition of all values amounts to a passage through the abyss of destruction.[213]

True faith remains hidden, which cannot be expressed in institutions, and the only expression that it finds are rituals that bring the power of the negative and of the destructive to bear [...]. The power of destruction is a constructive power.[214]

The Sabbatians refer to the metaphor of the seed-corn[215]:

The Torah, as the radical Sabbatians were found of putting it, is the seed-corn of salvation, and just as the seed-corn must rot in the earth in order to sprout and bear fruit, the Torah must be subverted in order to appear in its true Messianic glory. Under the law of organic development, which governs every sphere of existence, the process of Salvation is bound up

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[210] Scholem (1995), 311.

[211] Note how this idea ties with Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard, where the destruction of the metaphors also serves to unearth the true meaning of these metaphors.

[212] Scholem (1995), 312.

[213] Scholem (1984), 178.

[214] Scholem (1973), 207 (translation my own). Scholem quotes Bakunin; see Scholem (1984), 131: "The lust of destruction is a creative lust." (Translation my own)

[215] See also 1. Cor. 15,36: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."

with the fact of man's actions being, at least in certain aspects and in certain times, dark and as it were rotten.[216]

The destruction that the Sabbatians pursued was therefore constructive.

4.2.3. Summary: Sabbatai Sevi, the rotten messiah

I will summarise briefly what Scholem's analogy of Kafka and the Kabbala suggests. Kafka, it was said, writes in conditions where the meaning of tradition is lost. This loss itself gives rise to suffering; we could call it a "transcendental homelessness."[217] Scholem compared Kafka's writings to a heretical Kabbalah, for which Sabbatianism is a prime example. Heresy is no mere frivolity. It is the last attempt to preserve tradition in conditions that make it impossible to preserve tradition. Tradition must attach the element of destruction that is at work in a world that is completely averse to the content of tradition. Scholem therefore describes the logic of Sabbatianism as an intermingling of construction and destruction. To stay in touch with the decay of tradition or even to immerse oneself into it is still to stay in touch with tradition. It is the *substitution* of tradition by something else which is the end of it.[218]

Therein, it is structurally linked to Kafka's thought, particularly the aphorisms, which circle around this same idea. But the link, again, is not restricted to structural analogy; the historical situation of Kafka and that of the Sabbatianists is likewise comparable. Both describe a fractured world; their inner lives cannot be harmonized with their historical reality. Restoration in the sense of simple repetition is not on option. The fragments cannot be joined; in contrast, the destruction must actively be brought to an end. Kafka, thus Scholem argues, is immersed into the downfall of (Jewish) tradition, but by being so, he may chance to hit the bottom, a point where the truth of tradition is felt once more precisely as that which is *being* lost. This process is strictly analogous to Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard's concept of the self: hope is precisely to be found in the fragments of existence.[219]

I will argue in the concluding chapter[220] that these readings provide *models*. They cannot simply be turned into action; they are an aid for our reflection which still has a long way to go before concrete decisions can be made. The present study

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[216] Scholem (1995), 317.

[217] Lukács (1971).

[218] Robertson's and Hawkins's *substitution* of Jewish tradition by ethics (see p. 39ff.) ultimately sells tradition – as something into which we should transpose ourselves rather than the other way around – (Gadamer (1994), 292, Jasper (2005), 108) – out to particular humanistic ideas that "we" (allegedly) still find accessible.

[219] "Its [shattered melancholy's] ruins are the ciphers on which Kierkegaard reflects, and hope is integral to the absurdity of its desire. The order of the spheres is inverted. There where Kierkegaard supposes only the discontinuity and contingency of total melancholy, the natural impulse, even if denied fulfilment, clings to the names of its objects; in his philosophy hope nowhere insists more stubbornly than in the aesthetic 'Diapsalmata,' whose fragmentariness, according to Kierkegaard's hierarchy of spheres, results from the incapacity of the aesthetic to achieve continuity." (KKA 124; see section 3.3)

[220] See below p. 65f.

offers models that might open our eyes to violent detours, though these detours may *have* to be taken when one travels in particularly averse circumstances. Kafka did not find peace on his own devices. The Sabbatians did not succeed in restoring Judaism. And certainly, to study the history of ideas does not mean to dig out old recipes. It means to acquaint oneself with configurations that may help us to understand our world and our options to act better. Constructive destruction is the opposite of a "rule of thumb". It must be "applied" with extreme care. Destruction is never *eo ipso* constructive. But if we find numerous vibrant examples for kinds of destruction that were constructive within their particular circumstances, then it might be the case that similar options are "available" to us.

We will now turn to a contemporary novel that appears to rely on Sabbatian thinking. The fact that this prize winning and much acknowledged novel possibly enacts Sabbatian logic might suggest how deeply these apparently awkward ideas are enrooted in (parts of) our culture.

5.Su ffering just now: Sabbath ben Sabbatai, Philip Roth's rotten prophet

5.1. Introduction: Sabbath and Sabbatianism

Philip Roth, who follows Kafka's footsteps to some extent[221], finally takes us to the present; or rather, it takes us to the substrata underneath our age. In an interview with David Plante, Roth compared his own work to that of two great colleagues of his in the following way:

Updike and Bellow hold their flashlights out into the world, reveal the real world as it is *now*. I dig a hole and shine my flashlight into the hole.[222]

The mystical messiah Sebbatai Sevi, too, *descends* into the evil and dark realm[223]; Mickey Sabbath's journey through life is likewise described as a *descent*.[224] In what follows, the suffering of Roth's rotten prophet Sabbath, the protagonist of his *Sabbath's Theater*[225], shall be related to the Sabbatian movement. The question whether the Sabbatian movement actually does loom behind the very name of "Mickey Sabbath" can not be finally settled, yet I do want to comment on the factors that are involved in asking this question.

The link that I am presupposing receives support from the following scene that occurs towards the end of the novel: Sabbath is visiting the graveyard where his ancestors lie; he points to a tombstone with the name "Shabas" and explains:

"There's a relative of mine right there." Sabbath pointed to a stone marked "Shabas." Must be Cousine Fish, who'd taught him so swim. "The old-timers," he explained to Crawford, "were Shabas. They wrote it all kinds of ways: Shabas, Shabbus, Shabsai, *Sabbatai*." (ST 357 [emphasis mine])

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[221] Since we read Kafka and Roth in this essay, it might be expected that I would dwell on the relation between Roth and Kafka. The influence of the latter on the former has often been confirmed. Roth has written a piece "Looking at Kafka," and he uses the opening sentence of Kafka's *"The Metamorphosis"* in his *"The Breast"*. It has been argued that *"Portny's Complaint* could be seen as an American version of Kafka's *Letter to His Father."* (Tanner (1986), 64) Provocation is a means that both Kafka and Roth excessively employed (Shechner (2003), 151). Yet on the whole, the influence of Kafka on Roth appears to be less interesting than the structural kinship, which consists in the motive of destruction.

[222] See Shechner (2003), vii. The full transcript of the interview can be found online: Plante (s.d.). With the attempt to criticise Roth's novel "Sabbath's Theater", Wolcott claims that "his (Roth's) flashlights got stuck in the hole." (Wolcott (1995); quotation follows Shechner (2003), 152). I would argue that this observation is hardly a criticism, for what it points out has to happen by necessity; the abyss cannot be investigated in comfortable doses.

[223] See above p. 52.

[224] See below p. note 239.

[225] I focus almost exclusively on this novel because in my esteem no other writing of Roth would fit into the strand of thought that is here pursued as well as "Sabbath's Theater" does. The idea of constructive negativity does appear in others of his works, though. On the extremely lively sexual relationship of the protagonist of "The Human Stain", Coleman Silk, with Faunia Farley, the narrator comments: "Who are they now? They are the simplest version of themselves. The essence of singularity. *Everything painful congealed into passion."* (HS 203 (emphasis mine)

The last name of this list, significantly, is identical with the name of the founder of the Sabbatian movement: *Sabbatai* Sevi.[226] The connection between Roth's figure and the antinomian branch of 17th century Judaism has been made before[227] and has been questioned, if not to say attacked[228], notably by Mark Shechner. Whether or not one finds his case convincing[229] is eventually not decisive for the reading that I am

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[226] See Scholem (1973a).

[227] Unfortunately, I was unable to track the primary sources for this connection. Mark Shechner (see note 228) has kindly informed me upon my request that he only knows of such sources by hear-say.

[228] Shechner reports that he had 'heard it suggested that the book's antinomianism – what was proscribed is now mandatory – explains the hero's name: Sabbath after Sabbatai Sevi [...]. Maybe, though if so, it is no longer the restraints of Halakah, the law, that are being challenged but the Torah of Normality and the wellness industries that have sprung up to serve it." (Shechner (2003), 149f.) Indeed there is a difference between Sabbath's antinomism and that of the Sabbatians. This does not rule out the possibility that the two phenomena could illumine one another if read in context. In the same essay, Shechner introduces the question once more; this time, he dismisses it straightforwardly. "Possibly Roth did have him [Sabbatai Sevi] in mind, but even if so we can hold that as nothing more than a curiosity, a resort to symbols for the delight of the symbol hunters. Finding the Sabbatai figure in a novel – unless the novel is by Isaac Bashevis Singer – is about as helpful as finding the Christ figure, that old expedient of readers from another era who, praying to turn up hidden symbols, could uncover a crucifix faster than you can say 'Eli Eli' as a sign that a character has been 'redeemed.' The last thing we can expect of Roth is either to grant indulgences to his characters or to attach his meanings to any liturgical system: Hasidic, Gnostic, Christian, Hindu, Jain, or Jubu-Jewish Buddhist. To the end he will be loyal to his own brands of *mishegas*. Mickey Sabbath is a creature of nature, not religion or history, and he appeals to us in terms of tumescence, not of Torah. Don't bother looking for his prototypes in Gershom Scholem; try the police blotter. And anyway, Mickey Sabbath is an American and a madman of his time. In the old country, Jews didn't urinate on the graves of their Croatian lovers, did they?" (Shechner (2003) 153) A few points should be made in response to this statement in order to explain why I do not feel obliged to follow Shechner's imperative. The analogy with the anonymous interpreters who are excessively quick in offering Christological interpretations does not contain an *argument*. Why "the last thing that we expect" would be that Roth attaches meanings to liturgical systems remains obscure. Certainly Roth's *literary characters* are unlikely to subdue themselves to the demands of any authoritative religious institution. Yet to subdue oneself to the demands of an authoritative religious institution is quite different from attaching *meaning* to it. As a matter of fact, the situation that "religion" presently finds itself in could be described as characterised precisely by the persistence of meaning of religion after the loss of the power of the institutions to impose belief either on a community or on the public. Mickey Sabbath, as we will see shortly, attaches meaning to religious questions in so far as he comments on them frequently. This does not mean to imply that he is a "creature of religion or history", nor does it refute the claim that he is "creature of nature". The assumption that Sabbath's name bears allusion to the Sabbatians is worth pursuing in no way entails the claim that he was "creature of religion", whatever Shechna might actually mean by that. Sabbath is certainly a creature of nature, just like any other creature is, regardless of whether one adheres to a secular or to a biblical world view ("Adam" – אדם !), but acknowledging this fact is of little help for interpreting Roth's novel. Shechna's concluding rhetorical question draws our attention to the fact that Jews in the 17th century did not act as Mickey Sabbath did. (One may have to be reminded that Mickey Sabbath is a fictional character. Fictional characters tend to do things which "real" characters are unlikely to do, whilst revealing important features about the nature of the former in spite of this difference. The whole genre of parody consists of the "unrealistic" yet meaningful exaggeration of the actions of non/fictional characters.) This may be the case. Customs and the ways in which they are being transgressed change in the course of time. This does not mean, though, that people who live (and transgress the customs that are valid in their cultures) in different times are utterly unrelated to one another or that comparisons between them are meaningless.

[229] In 1986, that is, before "Sabbath's Theater" was published, Harold Bloom refers to the Kabbalah while introducing Roth in a way that emphasises the difference between the two: "Roth paradoxically is still engaged in moral prophecy; he continues to be outraged by the outrageous – in societies, others and himself. There is in him nothing of the Satanic editor, Shrike, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, or of Pyncheon's Kabbalistic doctrine of sado-anarchism. Roth's negative exuberance is not in the service of negative theology, but intimates instead a nostalgia for the morality once engendered by the Jewish

about to present: Even if Philip Roth had never heard of the Sabbatian movement[230], Mickey Sabbath instantiates a figure who resembles Sabbatai Sevi, and it is interesting to compare these two Jewish heretics.

5.2.   Sabbath's suffering

The horizon of the following reading that frames this comparison is again the motive of "suffering". Sabbath suffers greatly. I will explore the nature of his suffering first, and then develop what consequences he draws from his suffering.

During the whole novel, the narrator addresses the reader directly at one single instance. The scene is as follows: Sabbath and Kathy Goolsbee are in his car after the accidental or unaccidental revelation of their erotic relationship; Kathy offers to satisfy Sabbath orally and Sabbath struggles to maintain his determination to reject the offer.[231] The narrator takes side with Sabbath in his following appeal:

Not to hard on Sabbath, Reader. Neither the turbulent inner talkathon, nor the superabundance of self-subversion, nor the years of reading about death, nor the bitter experience of tribulation, loss, hardship, and grief make it any easier of a man of this type (perhaps for a man of any type) to get good use out of his brain when confronted with such an offer once. (ST 231)

The catalogue of Sabbath's suffering rehearses all the many aspects of the misery he experienced. Loss is the most prominent of them. Sabbath loses his older brother Mickey, who dies a horrible death in action.[232] His parent's house was literally a house of pain. It had, as it were, "suffering" written all over it.

We were one of those families with a gold star in the window. It meant that not only was my brother dead, my mother was dead. All day at school I thought, 'If only when I get home, he's there; if only when the war is over, he's there.' What a frightening thing that gold star was to see when I came home from school. Some days I'd actually manage to forget about him, but then I'd walk home and see the gold star. Maybe that's why people went to sea, to

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normative tradition." (Bloom (1986), 2) Since the antinomian branch of Kabbalah is itself a phenomenon that mourns the times when the normative Jewish tradition and history were in harmony, Bloom's statements do not rule out the possibility that Roth's "Sabbath's Theater" were enacting a meaningful allusion the Sabbatian movement. As a matter of fact, what Bloom says about the conflict that Roth experienced, i.e., a conflict between norms and reality, strongly reminds us of the conflict that gave rise to the Sabbatian movement: "Roth is a centrally Jewish in his fiction, because his absolute concern never ceases to be the pain of the relations between husband and wife, and in him this pain invariably results from the incommensurability between a rigorously moral normative tradition whose expectations rarely can be satisfied, and the reality of the way we live now." (Bloom (1986), 2)

[230] The name "Sabbath" could simply not refer to anything, or it could have a different meaning: Kelleter (1998), 272ff., assumes that "Sabbath's name" is related to the aspect of "rest" that is associated with the Jewish Sabbath.

[231] His struggle is particularly understandable as Sabbath knows at this point of time that his erotic life is overall declining. As a matter of fact, *during* the span of his lifetime that the novel describes, Sabbath never engages in an erotic relationship. All three opportunities that he faces pass unrealised.

[232] "Morty's burns covered eighty percent of his body." (ST 327)

get the fuck away from the gold star. The gold star said, 'People have suffered something terrible in this house.' The house with the gold star was a blighted house." (ST 144)

The second great loss that Sabbath experiences is that of his lover Drenka, who dies of cancer. Her death provides a frame of the whole novel. The opening scene of the novel ends with her exclamation that she is sick of cancer. Towards the end of the novel, Sabbath, who visited her sick-bed during the nights, describes her ailment.

> Dranka. *Her* death. No idea that would be her last night. Every night saw pretty much the same picture. Got used to it [...] Got used to the oxygen prong in her nose. Got used to the drainage bag pinned to the bed. Her kidneys were failing, yet there was always urine there when I checked the bag. Got used to that. Got used to the IV pole and the morphine drip hooked to the pump. Got used to the upper part of her no longer looking like it belonged to the bottom part. Emaciated from a little above the waist, and from the waist down boy, oh boy, bloated, edemic. The tumor pressing on the aorta, decreasing the blood flow [...]. If they'd operated, she'd have had bled to death. Cancer too widespread for surgery. (ST 416)

The experience of suffering and loss looms over Mickey Sabbath. His life is an outrage against the world, both against nature (respectively creation) and against culture. His outrage is religious, though in a very violent and destructive sense.

It is in the face of outrageous suffering that Sabbath's mission is carried out. Sabbath, the antagonist, unleashes the substratum of the (whole) society he lives in, i.e., North America in the 1990s, he realises everybody's unlived desires. This is why Drenka shortly before her death of cancer says to him

> You *are* America. Yes, you are, my wicked boy. (ST 419 [emphasis P.R.])

5.3.   Sabbath's mission

Sabbath sees himself to be on a mission of awakening people to erotic truth of their lives which they try to suppress.[233] It never becomes definitely clear in which way his suffering relates to his mission. It may simply have uprooted him and thereby made the lure of society unattractive to him. But his mission is not one of mere sulking; he is positively convinced of its necessity. If there is any blame that he feels he ought to take, thus he points out, then it would be the blame that he has not carried his antagonistic mission far enough.

> To everyone he had ever horrified, to the appalled who'd considered him a dangerous man, loathsome, degenerate, and gross, he cried, "Not at all! My failure is failing to have gone far *enough!* My failure is not having gone *further!*" (ST 208 [emphasis P.R.])

Sabbath insists that the crisis he engenders is already inherent in society. Sabbath does not attempt to impose a crisis on the people whom he reproaches; he merely exposes the hypocrisy of it. In his discussion with his former friend Norman, he

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[233] The allusion to Marquis de Sade is also an indication of this (ST 332).

points out that society would not react as strongly to him as it does, if the crisis were not already inherent in it.

That's what I hear from people all the time, people continuously telling me that the great thing I was called to in life was to cause pain. The world is just flying along pain-free – happy-go-lucky humanity off on one long fun-filled holiday – and then Sabbath is set down in life, and overnight the place is transformed into a loony bin of tears. Why *is* that? Can someone explain it to me? (ST 450)

Sabbath despises the mediocrity and phoniness of the world in which he lives, particularly its "secular" spirituality.[234] We shall acquaint ourselves with Sabbath's own messianic spirituality.

Frequently, Sabbath gives himself names that indicate his self-understanding as a missionary or even a messiah. Pondering on his situation and his previous life, he esteems his performance to be satisfactory:

Nikki hat run away from him, Roseanna was fed up with him, but all in all, for a man of his stature, he had been improbably successful. Ascetic Mickey Sabbath, at it still in his sixties. The Monk of Fucking. The Evangelist of Fornication. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam.* (ST 60)[235]

As is the case with all of Sabbath's acts and utterances, there is a deeper meaning attached to this self-description. Sabbath does not *merely* provoke or insult, he is convicted that he really is on a mission that consists of (erotic) transgressions for the glory of God – which, again, is quite similar to the mission of the Sabbatians.

Towards the end of the novel, Sabbath introduces himself as "Rabbi Israel, the Baal Shem Tov – the Master of God's Good name." (ST 402) This statement must be sheer irony, for Baal Schem Tov embodied everything that Sabbath despises.[236] Yet of course Sabbath's conviction about his mission is not as clearly defined as that of the Sabbatians; his life of transgression ultimately amounts to a withdrawl or a flight, whereas he is himself not absolutely sure what it actually is he is trying to escape from.

His cockiness, his self-exalted egoism, the menacing charme of a potentially villainous artist were insufferable to a lot of people and he made enemies easily, including a number of theatre professionals who believed that his was an unseemly, brilliantly disgusting talent that had yet to discover a suitably seemly means of "disciplined" expression. Sabbath Antagonistes[237], busted for obscenity as far back as 1956. Sabbath Absconditus, whatever happened to him? His life was a long flight from what? (ST 125)

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[234] "Secular spirituality, that's all he [Sabbath's friend Norman] exuded – maybe they all did, the producers, the agents, the mega-deal lawyers." (ST 341)

[235] It should be noted that Sabbath, although he is a circumcised Jew, relates to a Christian idea in this passage ("evangelist"). In the face of his arthritis, he also sympathises with Jesus Christ: "A nail through either palm you sympathize with when you suffer osteoarthritis in both hands." (ST 171) It is the *institutionalised* form of (Christian?) religion that he objects to. Upon Nikki's expressions of detest against "Priests, rabbis, clergymen and their stupid fairy tale" he flatly responds "I am no fan of the clergy myself." (ST 110)

[236] A record about Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, one of the founders of Hasidim, notes that his aim was "to establish harmony and unity." (Rabinowicz (2000), 96)

[237] Sabbath later remarks: "All I know how to do is to antagonize" (ST 143).

This passage is quite ambivalent particularly in terms of Sabbath's religious calling: On the one hand, he calls himself Sabbath *Absconditus*, thus using a divine predicate for himself; on the other hand, he implicitly admits that the meaning of his antagonism is not at all clear.[238]

As it is often the case, Sabbath is not sure whether his messianic call is part of the theatre he stages or whether it is real. His ascetism impacts on his friend Norman so strongly that it makes him wonder whether there is something religious about him.[239]

Maybe it wasn't repulsion at all that he [Norman] felt but something like awe at the sight of white-bearded Sabbath, come down from his mountain-tip like some holy man who has renounced ambition and worldly possessions. Can it be that there *is* something religious about me? Has what I've done – i.e., failed to do – been saintly? (ST 141)

5.4. Sabbath on destruction

Having explored Sabbath's (religious) "mission", we shall now analyse how Sabbath adopts the idea of a necessary and ultimately constructive destruction. Spying through the personal belongings of the daughter of his friends Debbie, Sabbaths finds a poem by Yeats and Debbie's note on this poem which endorse a view that, I assume, is tantamount to Sabbath's own perception. Yeat's poem reads

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day brings about the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone. (ST 164)

Civilisation is a leash on humanity that needs to be destroyed; thus Debbie comments in her notes:

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[238] Ultimately, it is suffering and death that Sabbath flees from. – That Sabbath is actually following a mission can also be seen in his "dialogue" with his deceased mother, whose ghost appears to him. "All you ever wanted were whorehouses and whores. You have the ideology of a pimp. You should have been one." (ST 160) To which he replies by affirming that his "perspective" is indeed an (elaborate) *ideology.* "Ideology, no less. How knowing she had become in the afterlive. They must give courses." (ST 160)
[239] Sabbath implied earlier that there is point in his "descent" (ST 140), a point that Norman, trying to understand the history of Sabbath's tragedy, entirely misses.

The theme of the poem is that man is never satisfied unless he destroys all that he has created, e.g. the civilizations of Egypt and Rome. (ST 165)

But destruction is not merely rebellion against society. It is also the destruction of a world that is naturally heading in the wrong direction – a world in which "There is nothing that keeps its promise"[240]. When dashing through an underground station and reciting from Shakespeare's King Lear, Sabbath concludes by affirming his desire to destroy the natural flow of things altogether: to destroy time.

The train reached Grand Central. People rushed for the open doors. The girl was alone. Sabbath was freed. "'Pray you now,'" Sabbath shouted as he wandered off the train alone, looking in all directions for Nikki's daughter.[241] "'Pray you now,'" he exclaimed to those standing back from him as he strode majestically along the platform, shaking is cup out before him, "'pray you now ...'", and then without even Nikki's daughter to prompt him, he remembered what is next, words that could have meant nothing at all to him in the theatre of the Bowery Basement Players in 1961: "'Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish.'"

This was true. It was hard for him to believe that he was simulating any longer, though not impossible.

> Thou'lt come no more;
> Never, never, never, never, never.

Destroy the clock. Join the crowd. (ST 303)

The text neatly draws Sabbath into his own recitation, turning theatre into reality. Initially, double quotation marks indicate that Sabbath is rehearsing quotations. Finally, the quotation marks disappear. The lament for Cordelia becomes the lament for Nikki. The passage negates his desire expressed earlier on: his desire to escape the merciless progression of time.

Turning life back like a clock in the fall. Just taking it down off the wall and winding it back and winding it back until your dead all appear like standard time. (ST 302)

If, thus says Sabbath's logic, the harm caused by time cannot be healed by winding back the clock peacefully, then destruction is the only way there is left. I shall briefly summarise where this leaves us. For the Sabbatians, the destruction of the Torah is the only way to be true to it; for Sabbath, the rage against the rules is the only resort. Sabbath's self-understanding is both similar to and diverse form that of the Sabbatianists. Their beliefs were Gnostic; it was the opposition between this world and the world that the Torah promised which led them to *disregard* the world and those aspects of the Torah that referred to worldly conduct. Sabbath and the Sabbatianism share the awareness that God's relation to the world contains extremely

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[240] Thus the title of the first part of the book.
[241] Sabbath (cringly?) assumed to have spotted his missing wife's daughter Nikki.

destructive elements. Sabbath, the antagonistic messiah, shares the assumption that the established orders must be transgressed for religious reasons. Thus, in spite of differences that remain[242], *Sabbath's Theater* can be seen as a contemporary close analogy to the Sabbatian logic of constructive destruction.

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[242] Harold Bloom is right in pointing out that there is a significant difference between Roth's antinomism and that of heretical branches of Judaism (Bloom (1986), 2; see note 229): Roth opposes *human* values; heresy opposes the Torah. But one should add that it is the Torah *as it has hitherto been conceived of* which Sabbatianism opposes.

6.Su mmary and Outlook

6.1.   Summary

In this essay, I have emphasised the meaningfulness of destruction as a possible response to suffering. Have I thus argued that destruction is good and desirable? Not at all. One can hardly overemphasise that destruction was looked at as a *response* to suffering, suffering being already there. The necessity of destruction is by no means, to be welcomed; it follows from the presence of suffering. Suffering, too, must never be welcomed – it must be fought. I shall define the status of my results subsequent to a short résumé.

I began by pointing out that life does entail suffering. A variety of responses to suffering can be imagined and indeed can be found. My emphasis lies on the idea (or hope) that suffering can be *reversed*. The idea of reversal, which is the substratum of the present study, can already be found in the lamentation psalms. Very shortly, I commented on accounts for suffering that tend to glorify suffering rather than envision the reversal that will lead to its end, as have been pronounced by Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross and Emmanuel Lévinas. The reader may find that I dismiss these respectable and highly influential reflections about suffering far too quickly. The rejection of any account for suffering that resembles a glorification of suffering can hardly be defended against those who are drawn to these viewpoints. I stubbornly insist on my belief that suffering is never "good". This belief rests on nothing but a personal intuition that will not be communicable to those who do not *feel* the same, though. Once I have made this pathetic decision, the rest of the book proceeds by interpretation and discussion.

I interpreted texts by Søren Kierkegaard, Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin. The reading of Kierkegaard leaves us with very diverse results. Some of the basic assumptions of Kierkegaard appear to be extremely problematic, whereas the literary qualities of his writings that are related to suffering are highly stimulating.

Theodor W. Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard teaches us less about Kierkegaard's writings themselves than about the possibility of reading a text against the grain – whether or not this distinction makes any sense in the first place cannot be discussed here, for this would require me to rehearse the whole debate on "hermeneutics vs. deconstruction", which is beyond the scope of the specific question at stake in this essay. Either way Adorno's reading of Kierkegaard enacts a logic of constructive destruction.

The term "constructive destruction" is a quote from Kafka's aphorisms, written subsequent to his falling ill of tuberculosis, while the logic of constructive destruction can also be found in earlier texts, particularly about his struggle for his liaison with Felice and about the necessity of death. According to his own view, Kafka did not find what he was looking for. But this "failure" of his is no mere

failure, if it is itself understood from the perspective of necessary negativity. This is precisely the view taken by Gershom Scholem, who presents a theological reading of Kafka which I think is much more profound than recent ones. Therefore, the latter are mentioned only in passing. Scholem creates a link between Kafka's work and a "heretical Kabbalah", of which the Sabbatian movement is a prime example. The Sabbatian movement, again, operates with a logic of "construction and destruction", as Scholem frequently points out. Maurice Blanchot is the only author known to me who seems to draw the connection between Kafka's reference to "constructive destruction" and Scholem's corresponding remarks about the logic of the Sabbatian movement, though this link is at best implied in Blanchot's work, and never elaborated on.

Finally, by presenting a close reading of Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*, I arrive in our contemporary condition, or rather the abyss that may loom underneath it. The question whether or not Philip Roth had the Sabbatians in mind when he opted for the title of this book does not excite me very much. Either way the *analogy* between the character Sabbath and that of Sabbatai Sevi is *interesting*.

And yet the overcoming of suffering may appear to be *impossible* – time and again. In this case, detours must be allowed. The detour that I took has led me to the notion of constructive destruction. Constructive destructive is the impossible possibility that suffering be fought even if there is no ground on which to do so – even if every soldier in this battle has already been overcome by it. Constructive destruction reverses the irresistible power of suffering against suffering itself. We cannot simply enact this constructive destruction, precisely because it involves incalculable elements. But we can learn about it by reading authors who have immersed themselves into it. The writings of these authors are models for the overcoming of suffering. A "model" can be understood as a means of exploration that does not suggest to reflect reality, but that rather constructs an initially heuristic structural analogy (Isomorphy) between different areas.[243]

In a less scientistic kind of way, one could say that my work is heading towards rules of art ("Kunstregeln") rather than towards technical rules. Schleiermacher distinguishes between these two kinds of rules by pointing out that rules of art leave it to the agent to apply the rules, whereas technical rules include directions regarding the particular application of these rules.[244] "Constructive destruction" cannot ever simply be applied. It can inspire our perception of particular situations and possibilities to act. Just how constructive destruction comes into play cannot be prescribed.

It may be felt that I am evading the decent quest for the reality of my idea and its applicability, allowing for the suspicion that constructive destruction simply has no reality, and is finally nothing but an unnecessary detour. Maybe. Maybe Søren Kierkegaard, Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem, Theodor W. Adorno, Maurice

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[243] Wolters (1995), 912.
[244] See Schleiermacher (1983).

Blanchot, Philip Roth (and indeed many others[245]) have been wrestling with ghosts. If that were the case, then so has modernity, which is related to (amongst others) those writers closely. Let me suggest to my imaginary opponent that we use the principle of constructive destruction -- the principle of using the negative for its own overcoming -- in order to overcome the ghost that apparently infects discourses with the superstition that the negative were any good. Let's turn constructive destruction against constructive destruction: if constructive destruction really is a regrettable detour, then we should find out what is wrong with key exponents of our age that they continuously seem to take this detour in the first place. In order to find out about this, we must explore it closely. This is what I have tried to do.

If we can get rid of negativity and negative dialectics by any means, then let us, by all means. I would have preferred to close with a straightforward recipe for the eradication of suffering, or to put it more carefully, with a recipe for a truly joyful life in spite of the existence of suffering in our lives, or, at any rate, in our world. I wish to emphasise that the vagueness and indecisiveness of my "results" does not pay homage to "postmodern" ethereality; rather, it simply reflects the nature of that which I can say without fearing that I offer a foothold which life will unconsciously shrug off like a blowfly. Am I saying that theology, in order to avoid promising too much, remains an exercise that can do nothing but explore the little of hope there can be found within our realm and to become practised and indeed to train others in this very exploration? Peut-être.

6.2. Outlook

Many interesting questions had to be left out in order to maintain the focus of the essay, for example the notion of lament: "Lament" could be a form of expression that responds to the incommunicability of suffering.[246] In his short piece "On Lament and Lamentation"[247], Gershom Scholem points out that lament is the zero-point of language, the point where language ceases to refer and only "means" itself anymore; a notion that, as I have mentioned earlier on, Scholem may have adopted from Benjamin's essay "On Language as such and the Language of Human Beings"[248].

Schopenhauer[249] and Nietzsche hover above many of the aspects that are taken into account.[250] Nietzsche's romanticist aestheticism links him to Søren

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[245] E.g. Euripides, Martin Luther, Walter Benjamin.

[246] I commented on the communicative problem at the beginning of this study.

[247] Scholem (1995). This text was edited only a few years ago and has rarely been discussed. See Mosès / Weigel (2000). The messianic aspect of Scholem's ideas could contribute to the "futurological" dilemma that I have observed in Janowski's discussion of the complaint-psalms (see above section 1.2).

[248] Benjamin (1986); see above note 200.

[249] Schopenhauer defended his negativist philosophy against criticism by responding flatly that experience supports his view (Schopenhauer (1996), 744). A critical appreciation would have to explore precisely what experiences Schopenhauer had in mind and whether his conclusions are legitimate.

Kierkegaard's "Aesthete"; the connection of aestheticism, the Dionysian and suffering appears to be present in *Sabbath's Theater* under the surface. In this respect, Nietzsche's prefiguration of the "modern" ailment could further illumine the genesis of contemporary suffering. Explorations e.g. of contemporary popular culture could deepen our understanding of the particular forms of negative experiences in the present. Indeed they could support my claim that reflexive detours may be necessary, because our age is not, as it may appear, immersed in immediacy, hedonism and aestheticism, but is rather highly reflexive and complex. Of the countless possible examples, I wish to mention only Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*[251]. This film could be linked to the readings that have been undertaken on several levels. To begin with, Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" could be interpreted with reference to the idea of "translation" that is adopted in the film. The true task of translation is (close to) impossible according to Walter Benjamin; it is only through the crisis of translation that translation can reach its task.[252] Translation is not only a linguistic process; "hermeneutics", the academic discipline that is amongst others concerned with the question how concepts can be translated from one frame of reference to another, engages with the question how the *conditio humana* is affected by changing times. Coppola's Film *Lost in Translation* is a vivid portrayal of the melancholy and the sense of loss that comes with the failure of the process of translation. The two characters are unable to move on from one "sphere" to another; Bob is unable to adapt to the changes of his marriages that the birth of his children has brought; Charlotte is unable to adapt to the rather empty jet-set life that her husband, a successful photographer, is immersed in. The utter aestheticism of Tokyo in the 21st century is the background against which the mourning for the real and for meaningful individual history is being staged. Bob and Charlotte are "lost in translation", stuck between one sphere and another – in a kind of way that is very similar to the loss described by Hermann Hesse's "genius of suffering"[253], the *Steppenwolf*[254].

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[250] Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out that the suffering individual must speak "yes" to suffering and destruction. See Nietzsche (1909) 128f.); Spörl (2002), 218 and Angenvoort (1995), 670ff.683 et. al.

[251] Coppola (2003).

[252] "For the sake of pure language [the translator] breaks through decayed barriers of his own language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work." (Benjamin (1986c), 80)

[253] Hesse (2001), 15. Suffering is, thus the Steppenwolf quotes approvingly from Nietzsche, "a reminder of a higher state" (Hesse (2001), 12), which of course reminds one of the medieval mysticism of suffering (see above chapter 1).

[254] Hesse (2001), 28: "'[...] A man in the Middle Ages would detest the whole mode of our present day life as something far more horrible and cruel, far more than barbarous. Every age, every culture, every custom and tradition has its own character, its own weakness and its own strength, its beauties and cruelties; it accepts certain sufferings as matters of course, puts up patiently with certain evils. Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap. A man of the classical age who had to live in medieval times would suffocate miserably just as a savage does in the middle of our civilization. Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, between two modes of life and thus loses the feeling for itself, for the self-evident, for all morals, for being safe and innocent. Naturally, everyone does not feel this equally strongly. A nature such as Nietzsche's had to suffer our present ills more than a generation in advance. What he had to go through alone and misunderstood, thousands suffer today.'" There is thus

In the introduction, I have indicated that relief from suffering must be sought by many means. In these closing remarks, I would like to at least mention that the logic of constructive destruction, particularly the logic of using the negative against the negative, is also employed in therapy. Paul Watzlawick's concept of the paradoxical intervention aims to help people out of their misery by creating paradoxes within their mechanisms of perpetuating their own ailment.[255]

These issues pressingly beg the question. Less obvious, but possibly also very momentous, is the question how these analyses about suffering relate to theology. Or rather, if one was to concede that these exercises can themselves be seen as theology, what remains to be seen is how all this relates to Christian dogmatics; I am thinking particularly of harmatiology, Christology, and soteriology. The Christian tradition of mortification and *mors mortis* is intrinsically related to these deliberations. The readings that I presented should allow one to reconsider what has traditionally been called "existential dialectics". Broadly speaking, they could help us to link theological, philosophical and theological traditions to the experience that I assume is the most pressing of all human experiences, i.e., that of suffering. On the whole, these ideas are heading towards a "dialectical" theology in the literal sense of the term. The word "dialectics" emphasises that suffering shall never have the last word. We are hoping that death will be devoured and that all tears will be wiped away.

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a deep melancholy in his simple statement "I was not a modern man, nor an old-fashioned one either." (op. cit., 187) The Steppenwolf is lost between the ages precisely because his parents were unable to destroy that in him which does not belong to their generations: "[...] the attempt to destroy the personality and to break the will did not succeed." (Op. cit. 15) Later in the novel, the Steppenwolf experiences a "destruction" of his personality of another kind, i.e., a destruction of all the aversions against "popular" forms of live that he learns to appreciate (within certain limits, that is; see op. cit. 152); the "pieces into which his so-called personality" fractures are eventually used as tokens in a game of chess (op. cit. 223); thus, destruction is turned into play.

[255] Watzlawick / Helmick / Jackson describe "therapeutic double-binds" that create short circuits within the illusory assumptions of the (e.g. paranoid) patients, thus destroying these assumptions from within and clearing the way for the understanding of the actual conflict that may have created the paranoid projection. See Watzlawick / Helmick / Jackson (1967), 242.

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Abbreviations

18D *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, KW V

CI *The Concept of Irony*, KW II

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, KW XII/1

EPW *Early Polemical Writings*, KW I

JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, transl. by H. V. Hong et. al. Bloomington / London: Indiana University Press

KW *Søren Kierkegaard's writings*, ed. E. H. and H. V. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990ff.

Pap. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2nd ed. N. Thulstrupp, Bd. I–XVI, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978

PC *Practice in Christianity*, KW XX

SD *The Sickness unto Death*, KW XIX

SKS *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn et. al., vol. 1ff., Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997ff.

SKS K *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter. Kommentarer*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn et. al., vol. 1ff., Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997ff.

SV$_1$ *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, ed. v. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and H. O. Lange, vol. 1-14, Copenhagen 1901–1906

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