

# Kierkegaard the Greek

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It is an untimely thought that Kierkegaard might be called a Greek, but in many ways the philosopher suggests it himself. «Let me speak like a Greek»; «a Greek would think...»; «what would a Greek imagine?»<sup>1</sup>, are recurring phrases in his first major works. They are not uttered in identification, but rather as a sign of isolating himself from his immediate surroundings. An equivocal gesture of alliance with a world which he in all other respects — as a Christian in modernity — most likely would reject.

«The glory that was Greece» clearly does not attract him. He does pay tribute to it, but as if in passing. It was becoming too commonplace anyway. Greece may be beautiful (with no inkling however of the pain Nietzsche could perceive in that same space); it may even display a high degree of freedom, show noble courage, as indeed was the case in Thermopylae. But for all its achievements the world it represents is a finished world, its ideals have irrevocably expired.

And any attempt of revival would in fact be futile. Aesthetically Greek immediacy has been superseded by modern reflection with its intricate obliqueness as the only adequate means of expression. A modern Antigone such as the author of the first part of *Either-Or* imagines her (*SVI* I, 132ff.) would disdain using direct speech. The secrets she has to impart must remain secrets, as they consist of the unspeakable. Her every expression is concealment.

Philosophically, Greek dialectics has faded after the emergence of modern speculation, with its more refined methods of dealing with truth or being.

But it was of course Christianity that gave the fatal blow which effaced once for all the childish piety and the primitive religiousness of those pagans.

Why then a Greek, why revert to Greek patterns of expression?

The same modern speculation that condemns Greek practices to inferiority, when applied to modernity itself reveals quite serious defaults. Modernity

1. For references see my previous study *Kierkegaard og Gracitetten*, Reitzel: Copenhagen, 1995, p. 10ff. I have since reconsidered the issue as a whole in the article «Becoming the Flute», *Kierkegardiana*, 18 (1996) p. 28-43.

is undoubtedly much advanced. But is its consciousness deep enough? It is a fact that a modern philosopher can develop his concepts without having to resort to «externals», such as theatrical devices that even Plato did not despise. But does it exist enough? And it is true beyond any contestation that Christianity has triumphed over the paganism of which Greece is such a perfect example. But is it equally the case that Christendom really expresses the Christianity to which it owes its name?

By alternately using Greece as a wall upon which modern concepts (such as the repetition or the moment) can bounce and as the authority to refer to when it comes to healing the gaps in the texture of this same modernity Kierkegaard does not deviate the least from his fundamental dialectical practice.

The rapid change of perspective into the opposite makes Greece exactly as contradictory as the writer himself. Greek primitivity (a necessary consequence of immediacy) is clearly scorned. How miserable of Philoctetes to scream when he is in pain! (*SVI* III, 239) Expressing our sorrows does have to be more subtle. But on the other hand who can be sure of modern self-containment —as indeed it was pictured much later by T.S. Eliot, showing the silent and empty faces in a train that «stops too long between stations», or speaking about the «growing terror of nothing to think about<sup>2</sup>.» In reality it might be no more than a façade or a self-glorifying disguise for emptiness of spirit. (cf. *SVI* III 101) A face may indeed express nothing, but we can never know whether it is a sign of profundity: there really might be nothing to express.

The silence of this nothing does not get transformed into anything concrete, not even when it takes on the opposite form, that of the most relentless noise. It turns out that modern man, whether mute or vociferating, betrays equally well his divorce from spirit, and in consequence the void he lives surrounded or possessed by. In this case —and it is constantly the case— he had better be a Greek, even if it implied crying.

Lack of spirit is firmly understood in the traditional Christian sense. Kierkegaard would of course never abandon Christianity to become a Greek, his attachment to Greece has nothing of the ecstasy of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, without whom however no contact with the Greek past would have been possible.

Being a Greek is never a quality in its own right. The act of comparison is always at work. Over against modern man a Greek possesses substance. Over against a Christian (but where is such a creature to be found?) the same Greek is found wanting. His gods are insufficient, utterly helpless. No revelation of the authentic God has ever taken place on Greek soil.

The anonymous Greek is then a term of concession. It is preferable to be a Greek than a lost modern soul. It is absolutely better to believe in and re-

alise immediacy, than lead a modern life in a no man's land —where immediacy is indeed left behind, but no higher reality has yet been attained, if it ever, by modern means, or by modern ways might be attainable.

But the same Greece that is the home of this anonymous Greek prototype has also produced highly individualized personalities, with whom Kierkegaard is at times intensely preoccupied.

Without for one moment losing their Greek characteristics they behave nevertheless in ways that loudly contradict the qualities traditionally labelled as Greek.

The strange but inevitable observation to be made is that those remarkable personalities distinguish themselves in the eyes of Kierkegaard for two specific virtues: they doubt and they exist.

Their doubt<sup>3</sup> is not only vigorous, it is intrepid. They will know nothing about suspending doubt when it threatens to devour them. Their investigations are the furthest away from modern eclecticism or lack of involvement. There is an unmistakable sincerity and spiritual courage in their quest.

The conclusions of their thought is something they intend to abide by, to train in thought is for them the exact opposite of a harmless scholarly pastime. Those thinkers are even prepared —and this has nothing to do with the usual bravado of dying for a conviction— to sacrifice themselves, if necessary.

Apart from some loosely designated Sceptics, or the walking Diogenes that opens *The Repetition*, it is no coincidence that the whole focus concentrates on the singular personality of Socrates.

To the extent that Socrates is a Greek (at least as far as the stereotype image is concerned) it would be no exaggeration to remark that Kierkegaard indeed intends to become a Greek, which then acquires an absolute value, quite different from having to reconcile to the «next best».

This tendency is very far from being plainly stated in *The Concept of Irony* (where the intention was to master Socrates —something to a great extent accomplished, i.e. from the point of view of mastery), but it is presupposed in *Repetition*, even if only one phrase reveals the fact (*SVI* III, 201). The phrase bears on Socrates' doubt, and on his purpose to refrain from immaterial, academic investigations, in order to pursue his main concern, individual existing being.

It is very crucial to bear in mind that this pillar of Kierkegaard's Greek consciousness consists of exactly equal amounts of doubt («am I perhaps a demon?») and existential commitment. It is attributed to the most intrinsically unknowable person in the whole of Greek antiquity. I am not referring so much to the conflicting methods of his representation (Xenophon-Plato-

3. Doubt and existence are discussed among other things in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* respectively. For Kierkegaard's appraisal of Greek philosophy in this context one could refer, by way of introduction, to *SVI* IV, 205 and *SVI* VII, 265.

Aristophanes, as Kierkegaard himself has dialectically used their juxtaposition in his Irony dissertation) but to the very fact that we only know Socrates in literary form and that in both volume and quality the principal «source» is Plato, an author who for all his devotion to the master has a highly intricate network of aims to pursue, among which the literary is not the least compelling.

Is it possible to obtain something concrete out of the hypothetical structure that goes under the name of Socrates? While the question cannot be answered in any definitive way, it is a fact that Kierkegaard's venture has turned out to be very successful.

At a first scholarly-dialectical stage he succeeded in extracting Socrates out of Plato, and utterly out of his time. He then converted him to the incarnate representative of one attitude, irony, and one only, knowing perfectly well that this is a completely modern practice, choosing it in fact for that very reason. But in a strange way immediately upon having mastered the old master, as it seemed, Socrates began to haunt him. It is the only accountable sense in which Kierkegaard can be called a Greek. But then the Socrates he converses with has abolished all Greek characteristics, unless «Greek» is taken to mean anything sufficiently alien to modernity to be able to challenge modernity at its very core: alienation itself in the form of an inextricable knot.

Socrates becomes the odd mirror on which Kierkegaard lets his developing existential theory-in-practice reflect itself. The mirror is opaque by its very nature but it reflects nevertheless exactly what it is meant to reflect.

This mirror must provide the guarantee and the sanction for Kierkegaard's internal compatibility with himself as a writer consumed by a burning desire to exist in Christian faith. Would Socrates' condition, as an invisible man deprived of any means of explaining himself, allow him to do anything else but tacitly *acquiesce*?

He agrees and he complies. He does approve of Kierkegaard's endeavour, both in its strenuous form (striving for existence, shunning painlessness) and in the extravagance of wishing to become a martyr. In the pure form of writing he sees to it that the wish is fulfilled.