

Kierkegaard's Enigmatic Reference to Martensen in *The Concept of Irony*

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After working through a couple hundred pages about the irony of Socrates and the Romantics, Kierkegaard, in his master's thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, sketches briefly his own view of the concept, which he refers to as "controlled irony."¹ Commentators have found this concept difficult to interpret due to the fact that Kierkegaard spends very little time explaining it. This has led to a number of competing views about what exactly controlled irony is supposed to mean.² Despite these varying

¹ SKS 1, 352-357 / CI, 324-329.

² See, for example, Alastair Hannay, "Serious about Irony: The Dissertation," in his *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. 127-153. Richard M. Summers, "'Controlled Irony' and the Emergence of the Self in Kierkegaard's Dissertation," in *The Concept of Irony*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press 2001 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 2), pp. 289-315. Oscar Parcerou Oubiña, "'Controlled Irony' ... Are you Serious? Reading Kierkegaard's Irony Ironically," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2006, pp. 241-260. Anders Moe Rasmussen, "Gives der en 'behersket Ironi?'" *Kredsen*, vol. 61, no. 1, 1995, pp. 71-86. Eivind Tjønneland, "Beherschte Ironie als Vermittlungsbegriff," in his *Ironie als Symptom. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Søren Kierkegaards Über den Begriff der Ironie*, Frankfurt am Main, et al.: Peter Lang 2004, pp. 263-288. Andrew Cross, "Neither either nor or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, New York: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 125-153. Joakim Garff, "Om Begrebet Ironi," in his *"Den Søvnløse." Kierkegaard læst æstetisk/biografisk*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1995, pp. 32-59. Henri-Bernard Vergote, "L'ironie maîtrisée," in his *Sens et répétition. Essai sur l'ironie kierkegaardienne*,

views, there is at least a general consensus on the overarching point that this is the notion of irony that Kierkegaard wishes to recommend, in contrast to either Socratic irony or Romantic irony, which are the objects of varying degrees of criticism.

At the end of his discussion of this concept and, indeed, in the very last sentence of the book Kierkegaard suddenly and seemingly without motivation refers to Martensen as follows: "Yet all this lies beyond the scope of this study, and if anyone should wish food for thought, I recommend Prof. Martensen's review of Heiberg's *New Poems*."¹ This reference to Martensen has long puzzled scholars. As one commentator notes, this reference has struck most readers today as "almost entirely opaque."² Nowhere else in the work is Martensen mentioned, and then surprisingly he appears at the very end in a rather cryptic and enigmatic fashion. This seems especially odd given the fact that Kierkegaard seemed ill disposed towards him by this time. Although his anti-Martensen obsession had not yet reached the heights that it did in the later journals, Kierkegaard was nonetheless clearly somewhat skeptical of Martensen at this time and jealous of his professional success at the University of Copenhagen. This has led many interpreters to the conclusion that this reference to Martensen in the final sentence of the book is in fact an ironic criticism of him. In other words, Kierkegaard is not straightforwardly recommending Martensen's text to his readers but rather drawing attention to it with a hidden agenda of undermining and even ridiculing it.

In this article I wish to argue that, on the contrary, this reference is meant in earnest. When one understands what it is that Kierkegaard has

vols. 1-2, Paris: Cerf/Orante 1982, vol. 1, pp. 178-181. Bo Kampmann Walter, "Den beherskede ironi," in his *Øjeblik og tavshed. Læsninger i Søren Kierkegaards forfatterskab*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 2002, pp. 69-73.

¹ SKS 1, 357 / CI, 329. See Martensen, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg. (1841. 8. 249 S. Reitzel.)," *Fædrelandet*, no. 398, January 10, 1841, columns 3205-3212; no. 399, January 11, 1841, columns 3213-3220; no. 400, January 12, 1841, columns 3221-3224.

² See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 99. See also K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 1), pp. 12f., pp. 185-187.

in mind about Martensen's review, it immediately becomes clear that on this point the two share a common position. Before going directly to an interpretation of this passage, I will first provide a general sketch of the context in order to facilitate a better understanding of the text by Martensen that Kierkegaard is referring to.

I. Martensen Prior to the Review of New Poems

In the fall of 1836, at the time when Kierkegaard was a student, Martensen returned to Copenhagen after a protracted journey abroad during which he met and associated with the leading philosophers, theologians and writers of the German-speaking world. His first publication upon his return was a pregnant book review of Johan Ludvig Heiberg's *Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course at the Royal Military College*.¹ This short piece was Martensen's first signal shot regarding the new views that he had been developing during the course of his journey. These views included a significant influence from Hegel's speculative idealism. While he was in Germany and Prussia, Martensen had met several of Hegel's students who were in the midst of a number of crucial debates surrounding Hegel's philosophy of religion—debates which would ultimately define the Hegel schools and thus this period in German philosophy. Although not a Hegelian himself, Martensen was nonetheless clearly sympathetic to many of Hegel's views and deeply invested in the critical discussions about them.

Some of these issues he took up in his dissertation, *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*,² which he defended publicly in July of 1837. In this work he critically analyzes the writings on religion of Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel, arguing that they all represent systems of

¹ Hans Lassen Martensen, "Indlednings-Foredrag til det i November 1834 begyndte logiske Cursus paa den kongelige militaire Høiskole. Af J.L. Heiberg, Lærer i Logik og Æsthetik ved den kgl. militaire Høiskole," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 16, 1836, pp. 515-528. (English translation in *Heiberg's Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 3), pp. 75-86.)

² Hans Lassen Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae in theologia dogmaticam nostri temporis introducta*, Copenhagen: I.D. Quist 1837.

autonomy. While autonomy is a universally positive term in the fields of ethics and philosophy of action today, for Martensen it is something negative. According to his view, the theories of the German thinkers that he analyzes all bear the stamp of the modern belief that human beings can ultimately control their own lives and destiny. This represents a form of hubris and a lack of proper Christian humility in Martensen's eyes. By contrast, he proposes a principle of theonomy, according to which the individual realizes and recognizes his or her dependence on the divine.

This work paved the way for Martensen to receive a position at the University of Copenhagen. As Privatdocent, that is, unsalaried lecturer, Martensen offered a course entitled "Introduction to Speculative Dogmatics" in the fall of 1837.¹ He was immediately able to captivate the imagination of the young students with his lecture style and his rich knowledge of the current situation of philosophy and theology in Germany and Prussia. Soon word got around, and students from the faculties of law and medicine joined the students of philosophy and theology in the lecture hall. Martensen thus created a great sensation among both the students and the professors at the university. Søren Kierkegaard attended these lectures and was a first-hand witness to the stir they caused.²

It should also be noted that during the summer of 1837 Martensen published an article in Heiberg's Hegelian journal *Perseus*, entitled, "Observations on the Idea of Faust with Reference to Lenau's *Faust*."³ This work was one of the concrete results of his journey abroad. It is an analysis of a version of the Faust legend by the Austro-Hungarian poet Niembsch von Strehlenau (1802-50), who wrote under the pseudonym Nicolaus Lenau.⁴ Martensen had met Lenau in Vienna and discussed

¹ A complete list of Martensen's lectures can be found in Skat Arildsen, *Biskop Hans Lassen Martensen. Hans Liv, Udvikling og Arbejde*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag 1932, pp. 156-158.

² See Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome II, *The Martensen Period: 1837-1842*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 3), pp. 123-133. See also Kim Ravn and Steen Tullberg, "Tekstredgørelse" to *Notesbog 4*, in *SKS*, vol. K19, pp. 177-183.

³ Martensen "Betragtninger over Ideen af Faust med Hensyn paa Lenaus *Faust*," *Perseus, Journal for den speculativøe Idee*, no. 1, 1837, pp. 91-164.

⁴ Nicolaus Lenau, *Faust. Ein Gedicht*, Stuttgart: Verlag der J.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung 1836.

this work with him in person. Inspired by Lenau, Martensen completed a short monograph on the topic in German, which Lenau helped him to publish in 1836 under the simple title, *Ueber Lenau's Faust*.¹ Martensen's article in Heiberg's journal is clearly a revised version of this work.

In the spring of 1838, Martensen came to Heiberg's rescue with a review of the latter's theater piece *Fata Morgana*.² Heiberg's work fell flat on the stage of the Royal Theater and was generally regarded as a fiasco. The reason for this was that Heiberg's ambitious attempt to bring Hegel's philosophy to the stage by means of an allegorical piece was lost on everyone in attendance. Lacking the requisite background in Hegel's philosophy, the audience utterly failed to understand it. Martensen then attempted to repair the damage by writing a review in which he explained to the audience the philosophical background that informed the piece.

Martensen was finally granted a fixed position at the university and continued his course on speculative dogmatics in the summer and winter of 1838.³ His popularity and influence were still continuing to grow. Again Kierkegaard was in attendance and took some notes to these courses.⁴ Martensen offered a class in Winter Semester 1838-39 entitled, "Lectures on the History of More Recent Philosophy (from Kant to Hegel) and its Relation to Theology."⁵ Here again he gives an account of Hegel's philosophy indicating the controversies that had arisen about it in the German-speaking world. It is not known whether Kierkegaard attended these lectures, but he did own a copy of lecture notes from this course, written in the hand of another student.⁶

¹ Johannes M.....n, *Ueber Lenau's Faust*, Stuttgart: Verlag der J.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung 1836. See Hans Lassen Martensen, *Af mit Levnet. Meddelelser*, vols. 1-3, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1882-83, vol. 1, pp. 183-187.

² Martensen, "Fata Morgana, Eventyr-Comedie af Johan Ludvig Heiberg. 1838. 125 S. 8°. Kjøbenhavn. Schubothes Boghandling," *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 19, 1838, pp. 361-397.

³ See Skat Arildsen, *Biskop Hans Lassen Martensen. Hans Liv, Udvikling og Arbejde*, p. 156. For an account of these lectures, see Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. by George L. Stengren, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 147-149.

⁴ *SKS* 18, 374-386, KK:11 / *KJN* 2, 342-352. (This corresponds to *Pap.* II C 26 in *Pap.* XIII, pp. 3-43.)

⁵ See Skat Arildsen, *Biskop Hans Lassen Martensen. Hans Liv, Udvikling og Arbejde*, p. 156. Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, pp. 133-149.

⁶ *Pap.* II C 25 in *Pap.* XII, pp. 280-331.

In 1839 Martensen participated in the debate about mediation that arose on occasion of a remark in a book review of his dissertation. The review was written by his friend, Johan Alfred Bornemann (1813-90),¹ who claimed controversially, “rationalism and supernaturalism are antiquated standpoints, which belong to an age which has disappeared.”² The implication was that Hegel’s dialectical philosophy had rendered these positions antiquated. When Mynster responded critically to this in an article, entitled “Rationalism, Supernaturalism,”³ Heiberg and Martensen took it as an attack on themselves and those at the university who were interested in Hegel’s philosophy. In this context Martensen responded to Mynster with a polite defense of Hegelian mediation, which he argued was a necessary tool for understanding central Christian doctrines.⁴

Martensen’s great popularity among the students awakened a degree of resentment. At the beginning of 1840 he was attacked by an anonymous critic in the newspaper, *Kjøbenhavnsposten*.⁵ He was

¹ Johan Alfred Bornemann, “Af Martensen: *de autonomia conscientiae. Sui humanae*,” *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1839, pp. 1-40. (English translation in Mynster’s “*Rationalism, Supernaturalism*” and the *Debate about Mediation*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2009 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 5), pp. 57-91.)

² Johan Alfred Bornemann, “Af Martensen: *de autonomia conscientiae. Sui humanae*,” p. 3. (Mynster’s “*Rationalism, Supernaturalism*” and the *Debate about Mediation*, p. 61.)

³ Jakob Peter Mynster, “Rationalisme, Supranaturalisme,” *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1839, pp. 249-268. (Reprinted in Jakob Peter Mynster, *Blandede Skrifter*, vols. 1-6, ed. by J.H. Paulli, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1852-57, vol. 2, pp. 95-115.) (English translation: “Rationalism, Supernaturalism,” in Mynster’s “*Rationalism, Supernaturalism*” and the *Debate about Mediation*, pp. 93-110.)

⁴ Hans Lassen Martensen, “Rationalisme, Supranaturalisme og *principium exclusi medii* i Anledning af H. H. Biskop Mynsters Afhandling herom i dette Tidsskrifts forrige Hefte,” *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1839, pp. 456-473. (English translation: “Rationalism, Supernaturalism and the *principium exclusi medii*,” in Mynster’s “*Rationalism, Supernaturalism*” and the *Debate about Mediation*, pp. 127-143.)

⁵ [anonymous], “Nogle Træk til en Charakteristik af den filosofiske Aand, som for Tiden findes hos de Studerende ved Kjøbenhavns Universitet,” *Kjøbenhavnsposten*, vol. 14, no. 25, January 26, 1840, pp. 97-99. “Philosophiske Suffisance i *Fædrelandet*,” *Kjøbenhavnsposten*, vol. 14, no. 31, February 1, 1840, pp. 121-124. “Sidste Indlæg: Sagen contra Lector Martensen som Mandatarius for Hegel & Comp.,” *Kjøbenhavnsposten*, vol. 14, no. 41, February 11, 1840, pp. 161-163.

reproached for corrupting the morals of the students at the University of Copenhagen and leading them away from the Christian doctrine. It was argued that Martensen was teaching secular philosophy, which was inappropriate as theological training for the young students preparing for the priesthood. While Martensen responded to the critic with two articles of his own, no real resolution to the conflict was achieved, and the identity of the critic remained a mystery.¹

Later in the same year Martensen published his monograph *Meister Eckhart: A Contribution to the Elucidation of Mysticism of the Middle Ages*.² This work on the famous medieval German mystic must also be regarded as one of the fruits of Martensen's journey abroad. Due in part to Hegel, mysticism was a topic of some discussion in Germany and Prussia. In Munich Martensen had met Franz von Baader (1765-1841), who was a leading figure in this trend.³ In this work Martensen interprets Meister Eckhart as a forerunner of modern speculative philosophy. This was the beginning of a lifelong interest in German mysticism.

This then takes us up to 1841, the year of Martensen's review of Heiberg's *New Poems* and Kierkegaard's dissertation. Heiberg's collection was without doubt one of his most successful works.⁴ It consists of four poems: "Divine Service," "A Soul after Death," "The Newly-Weds," and "Protestantism in Nature." Of these the Dante-inspired "A Soul after Death," designated in the subtitle, "An Apocalyptic Comedy," was clearly

¹ Martensen, "Philosophisk Beskedenhed i *Kjøbenhavnsposten*," *Fædrelandet*, vol 1, no. 50, January 29, 1840, columns 259-261. "Erklæring," *Fædrelandet*, vol. 1, no. 56, February 4, 1840, columns 315-316.

² Martensen, *Mester Eckhart. Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1840. (English translation: *Meister Eckhart: A Study in Speculative Theology*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 149-243.)

³ See Martensen, *Af mit Levnet*, vol. 1, p. 126. See Jørgen Pedersen, "Et møde med perspektiver eller perspektiver i et møde. Martensen hos Baader i München 1835," *Kirkehistoriske samlinger*, ed. by Leif Grane, Martin Schwarz Lausten, Jørgen Stenbæk, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag 1976, pp. 150-181.

⁴ Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Nye Digte*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1841. (Reprinted in *Poetiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-8, Copenhagen: J.H. Schubothes Boghandling 1848-49, vol. 7, pp. 191-203; vol. 2, pp. 313-379; vol. 7, pp. 125-168; vol. 7, pp. 204-207 (reprinted as individual poems). *Poetiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-11, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1862, vol. 10, pp. 163-324.)

the most popular.¹ Here Heiberg aims his satirical arrows at what he regards as the lack of cultivation among the Copenhagen bourgeoisie. He takes as his main character a businessman who had just expired. The story follows his path from when he is first turned down by Saint Peter at the gates of heaven, and then dismissed by Aristophanes at the entrance to the pagan Elysium. Finally, he ends up being welcomed by the Mephistopheles in Hell, where ironically he is perfectly at home. At each station Heiberg has the opportunity to point out what he takes to be the shortcomings of his contemporaries' understanding of religion, art and culture. While the dead soul takes himself to be a pious Christian, he is oblivious to what the Christian doctrine really is. While he takes himself to be a loyal patron of the arts, he has no knowledge or genuine interest in literature, painting or any other cultivated activity.

Heiberg uses Hell as a metaphor for contemporary Copenhagen. The souls are punished by being made to perform a meaningless task for all eternity: they constantly pour water into a vessel trying to fill it, but are never able to complete this task since the vessel has a hole in it, through which the water slips out. Heiberg believes that his fellow Copenhageners, just like the souls in Hell, are transfixed by the meaningless day-to-day activities that they engage in. This has made them blind to genuine truth and beauty. While they appear to be industrious and busy with important tasks, ultimately they achieve nothing with their efforts, and their lives are utterly meaningless.

II. Martensen's Review of New Poems

Like many of his Danish contemporaries, Martensen was captivated by Heiberg's new collection and wrote a detailed review of it. He must certainly have felt that he had a deeper insight into the work than most people given both his personal relation to Heiberg and his knowledge of

¹ Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "En Sjæl efter Døden," in *Nye Digte*, pp. 29-158. (Reprinted in *Poetiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-8, Copenhagen: J.H. Schubothes Boghandling 1848-49, vol. 2, pp. 313-379. *Poetiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-11, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1862, vol. 10, pp. 183-263.) A partial English translation: *A Soul after Death*, trans. by Henry Meyer, ed. by Sven H. Rossel, Seattle: Mermaid Press 1991.

Heiberg's Hegelian agenda. As noted above, this was not the first time that Martensen had attempted to explain some aspect of that agenda to the reading public. Martensen's review consists of three installments published on consecutive days from January 10-12, 1841, in *Fædrelandet*.¹ His main focus is predictably on "A Soul after Death," which is treated in the first two of these.

At the outset Martensen lauds the novelty of Heiberg's poetic effort. He notes the word "new" in the title of the collection and tries to make a case for the justification of its use. He argues that Heiberg has his finger on the pulse of the present age, just as was the case in Heiberg's famous treatise *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* from 1833. Martensen explains, "It is the spirit of the new age under whose auspices these poems were conceived; it is this spirit with its quickening view of existence which has here come to a poetic breakthrough and holds judgment day on its critics."² He then makes the connection between poetry and philosophy and thus links this new collection with Heiberg's philosophical campaign: "What philosophy has long whispered into the ears of its disciples, poetry now begins to preach from the rooftops."³ Martensen thus seems to see in this new collection a popular breakthrough of Heiberg's philosophical efforts, which have been otherwise slow to catch on. He writes,

¹ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg. (1841. 8. 249 S. Reitzel.)," *Fædrelandet*, no. 398, January 10, 1841, columns 3205-3212; no. 399, January 11, 1841, columns 3213-3220; no. 400, January 12, 1841, columns 3221-3224. See Markus Kleinert, *Sich verzehrender Skeptizismus. Läuterungen bei Hegel und Kierkegaard*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter Verlag 2005 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 12), pp. 144-147. K. Brian Söderquist, "Kierkegaard's Contribution to the Danish Discussion of 'Irony,'" in *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2003 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 10), pp. 78-105; pp. 96-98. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 111f. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, 2nd ed., London: SCM Press 1999 [1992], pp. 25-26. Robert Leslie Horn, *Positivity and Dialectic: A Study of the Theological Method of Hans Lassen Martensen*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 2), pp. 171-178.

² Martensen, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg," column 3205.

³ *Ibid.*, column 3205.

This work constitutes a part of a cycle of previous products, in which the poet has announced the same endeavor. If in the beginning this was not appreciated as it deserved, then the reason for this is to be found in the *vis inertiae* which appears in the reading public every time it is obliged to exchange its old categories for new ones. If the public now, as seems to be the case, is happy in the enjoyment of this work, then it has every reason to thank the poet since he did not allow the public's critical shaking of the head to prevent him from following the call of his muse.¹

Martensen places the blame for Heiberg's lack of success squarely on the shoulders of the lazy and slow readers, thus exonerating Heiberg from any blame in being able to communicate his message effectively. Martensen clearly welcomes the new effort and the promise that it seems to hold of paving the way to a deeper understanding of the new philosophical trend by a wider audience of readers. More interested in the philosophical message than the aesthetic or poetical one, Martensen states at the outset that his focus will be on the former.²

Due to the great popularity of "A Soul after Death," Martensen begins by focusing on this work, and indeed it occupies him for most of the review. While some people were scandalized by Heiberg's use of the Christian dogma of immortality and his satirical portrayal of heaven and hell, Martensen assures his readers that there is nothing sacrilegious in this. He compares Heiberg's poem with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which is known as a classic example of medieval piety. Here Martensen must have recalled that Heiberg had designated Dante as one of the great speculative poets in *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*.³ In any case, Martensen points out that the humorous portrayal of the dead soul allows Heiberg to develop his criticism of contemporary values since life after death, as depicted in art, is merely a reflection of daily life in the mundane sphere.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., column 3206.

³ Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1833, p. 37, p. 41, p. 45, p. 48. (Translated into English in *Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel's Publishers (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 1) 2005, p. 108, p. 110, p. 113, p. 115.)

Martensen takes up the issue of the pettiness and triviality of the deceased soul. The idea here is that the soul is a simple-minded, confused individual, who does not know what is true or beautiful. He does not believe in any deeper lasting truth and is thus buffeted about by finite conceptions. In short, the soul is a kind of relativist or nihilist, a person whom both Heiberg and Martensen take to be characteristic of the age. This was the crisis of the time that Heiberg dramatically declared in *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*. Martensen appeals to the Hegelian dialectical development from immediacy to mediation and finally to mediated immediacy, arguing that the soul represents the first step of this threefold development:

The field of hell, which is presented here...is not the realm of evil. It is the realm of the bad. Bad is a more immediate and lower category than evil, for evil is the spiritual opposite of the Idea and therefore contains a reflection of the Idea; by contrast, bad is only its immediate, unreflected contrast. Evil is always a certain inspiration [*Beaadelse*], indeed sometimes even its characteristic inspiration [*Inspiration*]; "bad" only designates the spiritual zero-point and expresses not so much the spiritual opposite of the Idea as a complete lack of interest and indifference. Therefore, its realm is that of triviality. The bad and the trivial are expressions for the same concept, only that the trivial designates more the phenomenon, and the bad, the essence. It is not merely limited to life's practical sphere, but also in the theoretical sphere, in science and art it has its extensive provinces. It is therefore of great importance that we, in the present apocalypse, have received a contribution to *the metaphysics of triviality*.¹

By using the term "bad," Martensen is drawing on Hegel's well-known usage with the concept of the bad infinity. According to Hegel, this concept means the endless repetition of individual terms. It is the sphere of infinite particularity of individual objects or representations. Therefore, the bad infinity represents a form of empiricism or realism. As Martensen points out, this is the reason that it stands opposed to idealism.

¹ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg," column 3207f.

The hell that Heiberg sketches is not one of moral evil in the traditional sense. Rather it is a hell of relativism and nihilism. There is no truth or meaning beyond the whim of the immediate moment. The soul is not morally wicked but rather spiritually impoverished. Since the soul can no longer believe in any enduring truth, he ends up in triviality and meaninglessness. Nothing can be taken too seriously, and the soul is quick to dismiss the possibility of anything beyond the world of his immediate, superficial ideas and impressions. The implicit social criticism here is aimed at the Copenhagen bourgeoisie, which Heiberg takes to be utterly ignorant and backwards. In addition, he regards his fellow Copenhageners to be self-deceived since they allow themselves to be distracted by their meaningless day-to-day activities. But this keeps their focus on the finite and the trivial and prevents them from seeing truth or beauty in any deeper sense. This leads to a “lack of interest and indifference” towards what is substantial and important.¹ The dead soul is, according to Heiberg, a typical Copenhageners, and his view of things is characteristic of what Heiberg takes to be the crisis of the age, namely, the loss of truth, beauty and meaning and the ensuing lack of orientation in all forms of cultural life.

Martensen takes triviality to be the key concept at work in Heiberg’s poem. He attempts to give a philosophical account of it in terms of the categories of the finite and the infinite.

Since spirit contains the unity of the infinite and the finite, what is lacking in spirit thus always appears when these moments indifferently fall from one another. One can therefore define the trivial as what is absolutely undialectical, what is tautological, what is only itself but has lost the transition to its other. It is flat and empty since in it one sees only an abstract, meaningless one instead of two in one, which should be seen. True science and poetry sees, just like faith, all objects as *double*; it sees them once under the figure of eternity and once under that of temporality.²

According to Hegel, the true infinity is the dialectical relation between the finite and the infinite. In other words, these two concepts mutually

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., column 3208.

condition one another, and the one cannot exist without the other. Thus when Hegel's logical movement is followed, the one category leads to the other, and the other leads back to the first, this movement thus forming a self-enclosed circle. By contrast, when these two mutually related concepts are kept apart and their proper relation is not correctly perceived, then arises the possibility of the bad infinity of pure particularity. This leads to triviality since one focuses on each and every individual thing on its own but fails to grasp the deeper dialectical relations among them. Martensen points out that in science the goal is to see "two in one." By this he means that while science observes the empirical particulars, it does not stop there but instead attempts to understand the deeper laws that govern them and their behavior. Thus the particular has a concrete empirical element but also an ideal dimension, which the human mind tries to grasp. Without this second dimension, one merely wallows in an insipid celebration of pure particularity. Needless to say, this is a profoundly Hegelian analysis of these topics. The deceased soul in Heiberg's poem has no inkling of science or a higher understanding of things. His world consists in the triviality of particulars with no deeper grasp of their inner connections and relation to a deeper truth. Like the Copenhageners of the day, the soul is undialectical and cannot glimpse the eternal in the temporal or the universal in the particular. As noted, this view leads to a form of Romantic relativism or subjectivism that can recognize no higher truth.

Again following a Hegelian triad, Martensen refers to art, religion and philosophy, the three spheres that constitute what Hegel refers to as "Absolute Spirit."¹ In apparent agreement with Heiberg, he thus describes the impoverished cultural situation of the day:

Based on this empty, one-dimensional perspective, this world-view denies the mystery in religion, the Concept in science, and the ideal in art. In religion it conceives mystery exclusively as the tautologically inconceivable, but in science it demands that the concepts—for it never talks about *the Concept*—be distinct and clear, popular and generally comprehensible, and

¹ See Hegel, *EPS*, §§ 453-477; *Jub.*, vol. 6, pp. 301-310. *Philosophy of Mind*, §§ 553-577; *Jub.*, vol. 10, pp. 446-476.

in art it demands that the ideal resemble reality to a T. since everything here must be simple and natural.¹

This is a profoundly rich passage that demands close scrutiny since it contains references to several different levels of criticism. With regard to religion, Martensen refers to Heiberg's portrayal of the soul's ignorance and indeed agnosticism of the divine. Saint Peter, wishing to test the soul, asks him to give an account of the spirit of Christianity. To this the soul responds, "Well, that is rather hard, / Mr. Peter, to say. / For the spirit cannot be captured in words."² To this Saint Peter recalls the opening words of the Gospel of John that God is the Word. At this the soul then demonstrates his confusion by stating, "He's inconceivable; that is what one is taught, / who is seeking knowledge of Him."³ With this reply it is clear that Heiberg blames not just specific individuals, like the soul, for the religious confusion of the day but rather society at large. The church and the educational system instill what amounts to agnostic views in the minds of people, without realizing that this is problematic with regard to Christian doctrine. This is a part of Heiberg's assessment of the religious crisis of the age. After the Enlightenment, the conception of God has become more and more attenuated, and the divine has become more and more distant. For example, for Kant, God cannot be known by means of theoretical reason. He is instead relegated to a postulate that must be assumed, while not proven, in order to uphold ethics. Or, for Schleiermacher, our knowledge of God is limited to a vague feeling of absolute dependency. The rich and substantial conception of God from the tradition has been lost. Both Heiberg and Martensen are critical of these modern views, which, they believe, have in effect eliminated God in an attempt to protect Him from the onslaught of Enlightenment reason.

¹ Martensen, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg," column 3208.

² Heiberg, "En Sjæl efter Døden," in *Nye Digte*, p. 49. (*Poetiske Skrifter* (1862), vol. 10, p. 196.) "Det kan jeg just saa lige / Jer ei, Herr Peder, sige, / Thi Aanden lader ei i Ord sig fange."

³ Heiberg, "En Sjæl efter Døden," in *Nye Digte*, p. 52. (*Poetiske Skrifter* (1862), vol. 10, p. 198.) "Han er ufatteligt; saadan man lærer / Enhver, som Videnskab om ham begjærer."

With regard to art, the story is much the same. The soul has no real sense for true art and no classical humanist education. In the passage quoted, Martensen says that this world-view “demands that the ideal resemble reality to a T. since everything here must be simple and natural.”¹ The soul can only appreciate art if it gives a direct and veridical representation of reality, that is, the empirical. But it fails to see that art should reach beyond the merely empirical and point towards the sphere of ideas. Art works are not simply empirical objects with no further meaning, but rather they attempt to capture a universal, an ideal truth by means of an empirical object, for example, a painting or a sculpture.

With regard to the natural sciences and philosophy, Martensen writes in the passage, this world-view “demands that the concepts—for it never talks about *the Concept*—be distinct and clear, popular and generally comprehensible.”² By this Martensen means that this view rejects philosophy in general since it has no patience to explore “the Concept.” Instead, the empirically oriented scholars simply ridicule and dismiss this out of hand. They demand instead something that is immediately comprehensible and accessible to the common sense understanding. Actuality is, according to this view, simply the world of empirical particulars. But again, this misses the point of the deeper meaning of those particulars that lies in an idea.

The result of this world-view is triviality and boredom. This is obvious since nothing could be more boring than simply enumerating particulars without any further attempt to understand them. As is well known, boredom is an important category for Kierkegaard, who uses it, for example, in his portrayal of the aesthete A in part one of *Either/Or*. The chapter “Rotation of Crops” is largely a meditation on boredom.³ In Heiberg’s poem, Mephistopheles announces that hell is not a place of physical torture and pain but rather “the realm of boredom.”⁴

Martensen continues with the comparison of *New Poems* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Dante’s depiction of the souls in hell is profoundly

¹ Martensen, “*Nye Digte* af J.L. Heiberg,” column 3208.

² *Ibid.*

³ *SKS* 2, 271-289 / *EO1*, 281-300.

⁴ Heiberg, “En Sjæl efter Døden,” in *Nye Digte*, p. 120. (*Poetiske Skrifter* (1862), vol. 10, p. 239.)

serious and sober. It even contains a deep moralism in its portrayal of the righteous punishment of sin. By contrast, Heiberg makes use of the motif of souls in hell but turns it on its head by transforming it into material not for tragedy but for comedy.¹ According to Hegel, comedy represents a higher form of art than tragedy. The comic element is produced by the self-conscious juxtaposition of the actual world with the contradictions and absurdities of specific characters or institutions.² Implicitly drawing on this, Martensen explains, “the comic rests on the metaphysical opposition between the empirical existence of spirit and its concept, between appearance and essence.”³ The comic element of the dead soul is produced by drawing to the attention of the audience the contradictions in his world-view. On the one hand, the soul takes himself very seriously, but, on the other hand, he is occupied with sheer trivialities. On the one hand, he takes himself to be a pious Christian, but, on the other hand, he claims that one cannot know God. He takes himself to be a great patron of the arts, but he ultimately has no inkling of beauty or the truth contained in artistic production. Martensen writes, “It lies in the very concept of the comic that it changes the mutable actuality to *mere appearance* but also preserves it as such.”⁴ Comedy presents mistaken views, confused characters and contradictory customs, that is, the flawed appearances mirroring a deeper ideal actuality. Each time a mistaken view is presented satirically, the author implicitly posits a true view as its dialectical opposite. Indeed, without a consciousness of this true view the audience would not be able to appreciate the humor since there would be no basis for comparison for the events and characters portrayed in the work. It is the contrast or contradiction between the ideality and the presented actuality that produce the comic effect. The poet creates an inverted world for the entertainment and edification of the reader. The soul, while a respectable and upstanding citizen of Copenhagen in life, is a hopeless imbecile in the afterlife. The contradiction enjoins the readers to examine their own values and views in light of the experiences of the

¹ Martensen, “*Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg*,” column 3209.

² See, for example, *PbS*, pp. 450-453; *Jub.*, vol. 2, pp. 566-569. *Aesthetics*, vol. 2, pp. 1199-1202; *Jub.*, vol. 14, pp. 533-537.

³ Martensen, “*Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg*,” column 3210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, column 3211.

dead soul. This is the main content of the first installment of Martensen's review.

In the second installment he steps down somewhat from the larger theoretical considerations and gives a step-by-step account of the work, tracing the soul's journey through heaven,¹ Elysium,² and hell.³ In his discussion of Heiberg's account of Elysium, Martensen approaches the matter from the theological side, contrasting what he takes to be the limitation of the Greeks' religion with Christianity. While Christianity represents the true eternity, the Greeks only had a conception of "the phenomenal eternity."⁴ He reads Heiberg to be criticizing those people of his own present age who "regard the phenomenal eternity as the only kind of eternity."⁵ The idea here again concerns an obsession with the empirical at the cost of the universal. The phenomenal eternity is the bad infinity of particulars. The true eternity is the dialectical relation of finite and infinite. The Greek religion is associated with the former and Christianity with the latter.

Martensen thus states at the beginning of the review that Heiberg's goal is to present "the spirit of a higher world-view, which will liberate the age from its inner emptiness."⁶ The age is suffering from a nihilism and needs to recover a sense of truth and meaning that has disappeared. Through Heiberg's philosophical works, in particular *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, he has tried to draw this crisis to the attention of people and to propose his Hegelian solution to it. According to Martensen's analysis, "A Soul after Death" is cut from the same cloth. It portrays both the crisis and the implied solution in a literary fashion. This crisis is the same one that Kierkegaard addresses when he discusses the notion of Romantic irony in his famous dissertation. While Martensen and Kierkegaard use different terms, the former favoring "autonomy" and the latter "irony," in the end they are discussing the same set of cultural phenomena that they witnessed firsthand in their own day.

¹ Ibid., columns 3213-3215.

² Ibid., columns 3215-3216.

³ Ibid., columns 3217-3220.

⁴ Ibid., column 3215.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., column 3205.

III. Kierkegaard's Reference to Martensen's Review of New Poems

This book review is the work that Kierkegaard enigmatically refers to in the final sentence of *The Concept of Irony*. In order to understand the meaning of this reference, we will first need to have a brief look at Kierkegaard's controversial notion of "controlled irony" since this is the concept that he attempts to sketch when he references Martensen's review.

The key to this concept is to see it as an alternative to Romantic irony, which Kierkegaard just examined and criticized in the previous section. It is Romantic irony which is "uncontrolled" or "out of control." It indiscriminately ironizes over everything. All customs, values, traditions, religious beliefs, etc. are fair game to this view, and there is nothing that can escape the criticism of the Romantic. Kierkegaard, in part following Hegel, objects to this gratuitous and flippant criticism of everything. It fails to discriminate between those things that are base, corrupt, contradictory, bad and in need of criticism and those things that are not. Everything is subject to the same harsh treatment. This is a purely negative view that leaves nothing positive standing, upon which to build.

This leads to a self-satisfied and self-indulgent individual who fails to accept actuality. Since the Romantic ironist can criticize any given interpretation of the world at any given time, he is not bound by actuality in the same way the rest of us are. He can simply choose on the spur of the moment to change his interpretation and with it his actuality. Kierkegaard objects to this arbitrary playing with the world that in effect ends up in relativism or nihilism since there is nothing fixed in the world that is respected by the ironist.

Controlled irony is the concept that Kierkegaard introduces in order to harness the negative dimension of Romantic irony but without letting it take over and become absolute. Some things are base, corrupt, bad and in need of criticism, and for these irony is perfectly in order and can be used as a good critical tool. However, this irony must be used with restraint, discrimination and control. The individual must realize that it has limits and that there are some things in actuality that are worthy of respect. In this sense Kierkegaard regards controlled irony as higher than either Socratic irony or Romantic irony.

This is the point where Kierkegaard's view converges with Martensen's. In his review, Martensen addresses the question of the possibility of reformation and salvation: is it possible for the insipid and oblivious soul to avoid being condemned to triviality and meaninglessness? In this context Martensen writes, "If [the soul] thus can become comic not only for others but *for itself*, if it can come to a higher irony both vis-à-vis itself and vis-à-vis Mephistopheles, it would then be able to be liberated."¹ Martensen thus suggests that the key is for the soul to recognize the shortcomings of his own views and to regard himself as comic. The result would be what he calls "a higher irony." Here Martensen again draws on Hegel's views about comedy. One reason why comedy is higher than tragedy, according to Hegel, is that the comic character can at times step out of character and shed his mask by means of ironic self-references that suddenly put the entire dramatic context in abeyance. This ability raises the level of both humor and irony in the piece. In a very self-conscious manner it draws attention to the nature of comedy as a poetic work.

The key here is to realize that what Martensen refers to as "a higher irony" corresponds in a fundamental way to Kierkegaard's concept of "controlled irony." For Kierkegaard, controlled irony is also a higher form of irony than that practiced by the Romantics. While Romantic irony was simply trivial and flippant, like the soul, controlled irony leads to a higher truth. What Martensen suggests is that the soul, in order to be reformed, must come to realize the triviality of his own existence, and one expression of this would be to use self-irony, that is, to ironize about his own actions and views. As the soul is portrayed by Heiberg, he says and does things that are ironic and are certainly perceived as such by the reader. However, the soul himself does not see the irony. But if he were able to make use of irony in a self-conscious manner, it would be possible theoretically for him to be saved, according to Martensen. Clearly the goal for both Heiberg and Martensen is for the readers to take seriously this message and to use it to examine their own lives. They too could develop an ironic, self-critical disposition towards aspects of their own bourgeois world-view that are characteristic of the same kind of triviality sketched in the poem. In this way the irony, while critical, has a positive

¹ Ibid., column 3218.

effect since it intends to correct the mistaken view and replace it by the correct one, that is, one that has a deeper sense of truth and beauty. Thus this kind of higher irony can be used as a positive, constructive tool. This corresponds profoundly with the young Kierkegaard's criticism of contemporary bourgeois life generally and his concept of controlled irony specifically.

In his review Martensen treats many other concepts besides irony that can be seen as anticipations of well-known analyses in Kierkegaard's *corpus*. For example, his discussions of boredom, triviality, humor, and the comic bring the reader invariably to recall specific passages in Kierkegaard's works. There can be no doubt that Martensen and Kierkegaard were passionately interested in the same set of issues that came from philosophical and literary discussions in Germany surrounding Romanticism. Despite Kierkegaard's never-ending polemic with Martensen, especially in his NB journals, there is considerable evidence that in fact the positions of the two men were not as radically opposed as one might think.¹ While it is easy to dismiss as ironic passages in Kierkegaard that we do not understand or that do not square with our interpretations, there is no reason to do so in connection with the reference to Martensen at the end of *The Concept of Irony*. In fact, when one is familiar both with Martensen's review and with Kierkegaard's notion of controlled irony, the reference is both meaningful and useful.

¹ This is the thesis of Curtis L. Thompson's outstanding study, *Following the Cultured Public's Chosen One: Why Martensen Mattered to Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2008 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 4).