

KIERKEGAARDIAN WRITING ACTIVITY AS *PHARMAKON*:
SOME CONSIDERATIONS FROM DERRIDA'S THOUGHT
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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the problem of writing in Kierkegaard's experience, reading it through the lens of Derrida's concept of writing like *Pharmakon*. The text will study some quotations of the journals in which Kierkegaard expresses certain ambivalences. Finally, the contribution will conclude proposing a reading of the Kierkegaardian writing like a Quixotic situation to show an example of the relevance that my analysis could have for the Kierkegaardian studies.

Keywords: *Pharmakon*, Quixote, writing.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el problema de la escritura en la experiencia de Kierkegaard, leyéndola bajo el lente del concepto Derrideano de escritura como *Pharmakon*. El texto estudiará algunas citas de los diarios de Kierkegaard en las que el autor expresa ciertas ambivalencias con respecto a dicho tema. Finalmente, la contribución concluirá proponiendo una lectura de la escritura kierkegaardiana como una situación quijotesca, para mostrar un ejemplo de la relevancia que podría tener este análisis para los estudios sobre Kierkegaard.

Palabras clave: *Pharmakon*, Quijote, escritura.

I. *Introduction*

I want to analyse the problem of writing in Kierkegaard's existential experience, reading it through the lens of Derrida's concept of writing like *Pharmakon*.¹ This understanding is justified in the ambivalence expressed by Kierkegaard about his own literary activity along his entire work.

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¹ Cfr. Jacques Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, in *Idem, Dissemination*, trad. de Barbara Johnson, Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981, pp. 61-172.

Specifically, he fluctuated between affirmations about the negativity of this occupation, and statements of the positivity of it for his (existential) well-being.

My text will focus on the study of some quotations of the journals in which the author expresses this ambivalence for appreciating them under the Derridean conception of writing like *Pharmakon*.² I will not analyse all the references to this problem, but just a few that I consider important and sufficient to characterize this issue.

Through the analysis of these quotations, this paper attempts to bring an innovative contribution to the largest debate around the Kierkegaard's literary activity.³ In fact, even if the scholars wrote a myriad of bibliographies about this topic, it lacks a study focused on the personal experience that implied for Kierkegaard to be a Christian writer. For it, I propose a Derridean pharmacologist perspective.

Finally, I will conclude proposing a reading of the Kierkegaardian writing like a Quixotic situation, to show an example of the relevance that my analysis could have for the Kierkegaardian studies.

II. *The Ambivalence of "Writing" in Kierkegaard: An Open Debate*

The problem of the relationship between Kierkegaard and his own literary activity is still an open debate that seduces contemporary scholars.⁴ However, we can affirm without any doubt that this relationship is a central concern throughout the entirety of Kierkegaard's career, even if "writing is never the object of a direct conceptualization by Kierkegaard".⁵ According to Millay, Kierkegaard understood writing as a tool and as an activity.⁶ In

² In this article I will consider only the *Journals*, because they are sufficient for the analysis that I want to do. In addition, a study that considers all of Kierkegaard's production would introduce methodological problems regarding the use of primary sources that would exceed the scope of my work. Instead, the exclusive use of *Journals* guarantees a coherence in the analysis.

³ Cfr. Daniel W. Conway (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaard. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, Vol. I. Authorship and Authenticity: Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

⁴ For example, cfr. Laura Llevadot, "Kierkegaard y Platón: la cuestión de la escritura", *Convivium*, vol. 20, 2007, p. 173.

⁵ Thomas J. Millay, "Writing" in *Kierkegaard's Concepts. Tome VI: Salvation to Writing*, ed. by Emmanuel Steven, William McDondal and Jon Stewart, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 271.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

fact, he developed his whole philosophical and religious work around a complex communicative strategy of authorship,⁷ and he spent all his life writing every single day.

Regarding the connotation of writing as a tool, Kierkegaard wrote a series of books in order to convince the audience of their own social context: Copenhagen during the first half of the XIX Century. This was done to bring them into the orbit of the authentic Christian truth (and the consequent lifestyle) that, according to him, his fellow citizens were involuntarily ignoring.⁸

Parallel to this maieutic activity, he filled up a lot of *Journals* in which, every single day, he noted his reflections about various aspects of life from his aesthetic, religious, political, and philosophical opinions to commentaries of his daily life. In other words, the writing involves his existence in a multiplicity of levels.

Rocca points out the contradiction within Kierkegaard's goal of teaching the real Christian lifestyle through writing. He specifies that, in Kierkegaard's opinion, said message is not theoretical but practical. Therefore, Christianity cannot be explained by books, instead it is mandatory to offer a practical example to show this lifestyle.⁹ More specifically, the concrete model that must be followed is the life of Jesus.

According to this, if the right way to become a Christian is to imitate Jesus' life, we will deduce that the literary activity is the opposite to the religious life in the terms in which Kierkegaard conceived it, because the literature creates worlds in which the Christian truth is not the only one possible and it prevents the eventual Christians from following Jesus' example.¹⁰ In addition, considering that Kierkegaard wrote during his entire life, we must infer that he was not a good Christian, because he preferred to continue writing instead of imitating Jesus' life example.¹¹

⁷ Cfr. for example, Catalina Elena Dobre, "Søren Aabye Kierkegaard: Obra, seudónimos y comunicación indirecta", in *Søren Kierkegaard. Una reflexión sobre la existencia humana*, ed. by Luis Guerrero, México: Universidad, Iberoamericana 2009, pp. 23-38; and Luis Guerrero, "Los seudónimos en las obras de Søren Kierkegaard", *Estudios Kierkegaardianos. Revista de filosofía*, vol. 6, 2020, pp. 207-236.

⁸ For example, Luis Guerrero, *La verdad subjetiva. Søren Kierkegaard como escritor*, México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004, pp. 31 s., links this Kierkegaard's conception of the truth with his activity like writer.

⁹ Cfr. Ettore Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, Roma: Carocci Editore, 2012, p. 17.

¹⁰ In the same sense Anna Giannatiempo Quinzio, *L'estetico in Kierkegaard*, Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1992, p. 106.

¹¹ Cfr. Fabio Bartoli, *El mismo lado del mundo. La seducción donjuanesca y la decisión fáustica en Kierkegaard y Kafka*, Santa Rosa del Cabal: Casa de Asterión, 2022, pp. 269 ss.

Rocca defines this *cul de sac* as “the fundamental paradox that at the same time sustains and questions the entirety of Kierkegaard’s work”¹² –I will give it a further review at the end of my analysis. I do not want to resolve it, but rather to focus on a secondary paradox that derives from the first one: If Kierkegaard wanted to become a Christian and if he knew that writing is an obstacle to obtain this result, why did he decide to continue the activity of writing?

To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the existential implication of stopping his writing activity. Like I said, the effects of writing in Kierkegaard’s experience can be divided in two groups: The positive ones and the negative ones. In the first case, writing has a “remedy effect” on Kierkegaard, while in the second one writing can be considered like a “poison” to him. The aim of the article is to analyse them to try to understand the relation between Kierkegaard and his own literary activity.

III. *Writing as Existential Remedy*

According to Kierkegaard, the framework of his literary activity is religious. Thus, his goal was to write about Christianity. Furthermore, he considered that this purpose existed just because he suffered from melancholy, which was a familial inheritance. Specifically, he writes that he was able to “serve an idea,” thanks to the literary aptitude derived from his melancholic state and the consequent suffering.¹³ However, this special gift has another private positive effect on Kierkegaard: writing helps him to alleviate the heaviness (*Tungsid*) that he suffered because of his melancholy.¹⁴ In other words, the typical existential mood of the poetic existence¹⁵, namely despair, is lightened through the practice of writing:

¹² Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, p. 17 (All the translations are mine except the cases in which the name of the translator is indicated).

¹³ SKS 20, 35, NB 34 / KJN 4, 33-36.

¹⁴ Cfr. Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, p. 37. According to Calvino, to struggle with the heaviness thanks to the lightness of writing is a typical behavior of melancholic people, cfr. Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il nuovo millennio*, Torino: Einaudi, 1993, pp. 20 ss.

¹⁵ Cfr. Giannatiempo Quinzio, *L'estetico in Kierkegaard*, pp. 103-127. In addition, we can find a description of it in the first part of *Enten-eller: Diapsalmata*; cfr. Guerrero, Luis and Jesús René Flores Castellanos, “*Diapsalmata: la existencia como vacío en un seudónimo de Kierkegaard*”, *Devenires*, vol. XVIII, n. 35, 2017, pp. 103-136.

Only when I am productive do I feel well. Then I forget all the unpleasant things of life, all the sufferings; then I am happy and at home with my thoughts. If I stop for just a couple of days, I immediately become ill, overwhelmed, oppressed; my head becomes heavy and burdened. After having gone on day after day for 5 or 6 years, this urge, so copious, so inexhaustible, still surges just as copiously—this urge must also of course be a calling from God. If this, the entire wealth of thoughts that is still present in my soul, is repressed, it will be a torment, a martyrdom, and I will be totally incapable of anything.¹⁶

Following this reflection, we must add and underline that, for Kierkegaard, writing acts just like a drug for his health. In fact, he writes: “How true, then, are those words that I have so often said of myself, that as Scheherazade saved her life by telling tales, I save my life or keep myself alive by producing.”¹⁷ In other words, according to this quotation, we can affirm that, in Kierkegaard’s experience, writing is a matter of life and death.

It is possible to affirm that this is due to two positive functions that the writing has for him. On the one hand, this activity works like an occupation, which is meant to provide self-care to the writer himself, who writes to struggle against the heaviness that melancholy causes him. On the other hand, there is another implicit necessity for Kierkegaard: He writes every day, because he puts into action the dictate that Goethe expresses in his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit*. According to him, life’s events make sense only when the poet writes about them. In fact, Kierkegaard writes and rewrites obsessively about his life trying to give it a sort of sense that the reality was not able to produce. In other words, when he writes about his life, he applies the same rules discovered in 1835, which guide his life: he is looking for a truth—in this case, a meaning—which is truth for him, and this is possible only through the poetic reinterpretation of life.¹⁸ Anyway, sometimes this operation is impossible, and this difficulty throws the poet in a condition of personal undefinition that Kierkegaard struggles with, and which hurts him.

¹⁶ SKS 20, 83, NB 108 / KJN 4, 82.

¹⁷ SKS 21, 159 / KJN 5, 167.

¹⁸ Cfr Joakim Garff, “»Produire fut ma vie» – problèmes et perspectives de la biographie de Kierkegaard», in *Kierkegaard aujourd’hui. Recherches kierkegaardianes au Danemark et en France*, ed. by Jacques Caron, Odense: Odense University Press, 1998, pp. 17-33; and Laura Llevadot, “Hacer la verdad: el “yo” de la confesión en Kierkegaard, Foucault y Derrida”, *Estudios Kierkegaardianos. Revista de Filosofía*, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 150-168.

In fact, even if Kierkegaard shows several positive aspects of writing, he shows just as many negatives; among them, this sense of ambiguity is only one example. I will analyse them in the next section.

IV. *Writing as Existential Poison*

The first problem that Kierkegaard sees in the literary activity is of a religious nature. In the words of Anti-Climacus: “Christianly understood, every poet-existence (aesthetics notwithstanding) is sin, the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and the true through the imagination instead of being that—that is, existentially striving to be that.”¹⁹

More precisely, in this passage Kierkegaard points out the implicit contradiction of the relation between religion and literary activity. To be a poet implies to commit a sin, because writing, even about Christianity, implies to choose another activity instead of the Christian lifestyle.

Obviously, when Kierkegaard exposes this antinomy, he is offering an example of the poetic reinterpretation of his life experience that I mentioned before. Then, probably, in this passage Kierkegaard is speaking about his own personal situation as “religious poet.” He knows that writing is useful because “it makes manifest the illusion of Christendom and provides a vision of what it is to become a Christian”,²⁰ but he also knows that this involves a situation of sin for him, the poet. The conscience of this condition allows Kierkegaard to reflect about his state of being a religious writer in these terms:

If I consider my own personal life, am I thus a Christian or is my personal existence not a purely poetical existence, with even an element of something demonic[?] The idea is to dare measure myself against such a colossal standard, making myself so unhappy that I would find myself in a situation where I could really become a Christian. But do I really have the right to do it in such a dramatic way that the Christendom of an entire country becomes involved.

Is there not something dubious about all this, about treacherously setting a fire in order to throw oneself into the arms of God perhaps, because it might turn out that I didn't become Christian after all.²¹

¹⁹ SKS 11, 191 / SUD, 77.

²⁰ SKS 16, 68 / PV, 88.

²¹ SKS 22, 127, NB 11, 204 / KJN 6, 124.

As we can see, he is struggling between his passion for writing and the conscience of the sin that it implies. In addition, we can add another facet to this problem. According to Rocca, “the writing interposes between the self and himself, it is a distraction not to say you to himself.”²²

From a Christian perspective, this split between the writer and his own self is a *conditio sine qua non* for not being able to take any existential decision, which is the first step to become a person, *Enkelte*.²³ In fact, Kierkegaard notes in some entries of his journals his doubts and his incapability to decide, for example:

There has indeed been a terrible degree of melancholia in all the thoughts with which I've plagued myself recently concerning my activities as an author. But the thing is, I wanted to be so terribly clever rather than relying on faith and prayer. I wanted to secure a comfortable future and sit somewhere remote and write. O, alas! No, God takes care. And another “poet” is certainly not what the age needs. And if I became a poet, I'd be forgetting to seek God's kingdom first. First, a living, a post (which I might not even be good at) and then writing. That's why I've suffered so terribly. It's my punishment. I've also suffered because I wouldn't commit, because I wanted to remain free, because I wanted to shy away from the crucial decision.²⁴

As we can see in this quotation, the inability to make decisions was a constant in Kierkegaard's experience. The consequences of this absence of decisions are enormous, because he/she who cannot decide is unable to do the jump of the faith, then incapable to become a real Christian and so, he/she is condemned to suffer of despair until his/her death, namely sickness unto death. Moreover, he/she will be unable to accomplish the *repetition* because of the incorrect development of his/her interiority.

If we consider that the *repetition* (the constant reaffirmation of the decision to do the jump of the faith towards the Absolute represented by God) is one of the fundamental steps in Kierkegaard's conception of becoming an individual,²⁵ we can understand all the negative consequences that writing implied in his experience.

²² Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, p. 39.

²³ Cfr. Catalina Elena Dobre, “La *Philosophia Cordis* en el pensamiento de Søren Kierkegaard”, *Estudios Kierkegaardianos. Revista de filosofía*, vol. 5, 2019, p. 102.

²⁴ *SKS* 22, 12, *NB* 11: 8 / *KJN* 6, 8.

²⁵ About the importance of the concept of repetition, cfr. Catalina Elena Dobre, “La *repetición*: Un escrito *sui generis* en la autoría de Søren Kierkegaard”, *Tópicos. Revista de Filosofía*, vol. 59, 2020, pp. 275-300.

Finally, we must note that he spent his entire life within this contradiction. In fact, it is interesting to read sentences such as “I am like a Janus bifront”²⁶ in the light of this contradiction due to his literary activity. In my opinion, this ambiguity allows us to interpret the problem of writing for Kierkegaard with Derrida’s concept of writing like *pharmakon*, because this key of reading properly contains the double function, remedy, and poison, that writing had for Kierkegaard during his life.

V. *Writing is a Pharmakon for the Writer and for the Reader*

For Kierkegaard writing functions as a useful activity to struggle with melancholy and, at the same time, like an obstacle to undertake the jump towards the faith and become an authentic Christian. With this in mind, it is convenient to introduce Derrida’s concept of writing like *Pharmakon* for appreciating the pertinence of this approach in understanding the ambiguity of writing in Kierkegaard’s thought.

In his book *Plato’s Pharmacy*, Derrida analyses Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates discusses with Phaedrus about the content of a Lysias’ discourse about love, transcript and shown by Phaedrus. In this work, Derrida examines the peculiarity of writing and its ambiguity. The fact that Phaedrus has a written version of the discourse assumes a central role in Derrida’s reflection:

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously— beneficent or maleficent.²⁷

Then, Derrida starts his analysis with the comparison that Socrates does between the written text that Phaedrus brings and the *Pharmakon*. This parallel is based on the ambivalence of the Greek word *Pharmakon*. That is, this term could denote “both remedy and poison.”

Kierkegaard’s relation to writing can be read in the same perspective applied by Derrida to the Socratic definition. More specifically, this key reading allows us to underline one of the facets that writing expresses, in

²⁶ SKS 18, 94, FF:92 (II A 662) / KJN 2, 86.

²⁷ Derrida, *Plato’s Pharmacy*, p. 70.

particular the Kierkegaardian one, which is highlighted by Derrida too: Its seductive nature. In these lines:

Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws. Here, it takes Socrates out of his proper place and off his customary track. The latter had always kept him inside the city. The leaves of writing act as a *pharmakon* to push or attract out of the city the one who never wanted to get out, even at the end, to escape to hemlock. They take him out of himself and draw him onto a path that is properly an *exodus*.²⁸

Then, the seductive effect of writing has such power that can misdirect Socrates' conscience for attracting him over his usual context, over the wall of the *polis*.²⁹ For him, the city meant the common life, which is the only frame in which the practice of philosophy is possible. Therefore, it is possible to state that the pleasure the relationship writing produced has the power to isolate the *individual* from his community.

In Kierkegaard's case, he suffered from writing's seductive power, too. In fact, he became a writer because he wanted to use his poetic abilities for persuading his compatriots to rediscover the real Christian lifestyle. But he had the plan of abandoning this activity to become a Christian himself (it is necessary to leave writing, because each poetic existence is a sin).

In other words, initially, his literary activity had the goal of implementing a seductive operation towards the others in favour of the Christianity. However, he never abandoned writing. It could be due to the fact that Kierkegaard experienced the seduction of the pleasure of writing, and he was not able to stop taking this *pharmakon*,³⁰ and he finished excluded from his social context, just like Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. For example, see this reflection that Kierkegaard wrote in the last period of his life:

Much of what I've been tormenting myself about—whether it is permissible to be a poet—could very well be seen from another perspective as a melancholic demand to be more than human. I have had the benefit of having money and have therefore recognized that I was not a witness to the truth in a stricter

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The improving of the quality of the *polis*' life is the one of the most important aims of the Platonic dialogues, in particular the earlier ones: cfr. Laura Candiotta, "Socrate: il dialogo come farmaco", in *Primum Philosophari. Filosofia di tutti i tempi per la vita di tutti i giorni*, ed. by Laura Candiotta and Luigi Tarca, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2013, pp. 53.

³⁰ Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, p. 39, he arrived at a similar conclusion, but without considering the writing like *Pharmakon*.

sense now I no longer have that benefit: [but] this doesn't change things; such benefits are not at all a plus but a minus.

Now (as was my idea from the very first moment) I am thinking in another way about securing my means. This is entirely consistent. I cannot play the role of someone exceptional, I cannot defend such a step I am an inspector and a poet. My incognito remains more or less in place.

I have reached the limits of my individual capacities, which is why the struggle is so difficult, lest I go too far or do not go far enough. I think this will be the case if I seek a position and publish the finished material pseudonymously.

All of this is worked out in detail in Journal NB, however, which I return to again after almost having wanted to go beyond my limits; but this suffering is precisely the kind of boundary dispute that, ethically, ought to be taken as seriously as possible.

I have never, ever, not from the very outset, imagined that I would continue primarily to be an author for even a moment longer than I had the means to support myself in it.³¹

According to this quotation, the ambiguity of *Pharmakon* as poison and remedy at the same time arises again. Hence, it is appropriate to remember that the social isolation that writing produces is the price for the pleasure of doing it and to attract the other to his own existential position.

However, we must emphasize that there is a substantial difference between Kierkegaard's situation and the Socratic one: Both try to seduce the neighbor for a higher goal, but the Greek does it thanks to his dialogue,³² while the Dane only does it thanks to his writing. In fact, Socrates gave into the temptation of writing just with Phaedrus, in the episode analyzed before, and only for using the written text for another aim –the dialogue–. On the contrary, Kierkegaard fell into this practice constantly during his life. According to Derrida, in Socrates' case happens a thing which does not occur in Kierkegaard one, that is:

Writing must return to being what it *should never have ceased to be*: an accessory, an accident, an excess.

The cure by *logos*, exorcism, and catharsis will thus eliminate the excess. But this elimination, being therapeutic in nature, must call upon the very thing it is expelling, the very surplus it is *putting out*. The pharmaceutical operation must therefore *exclude itself from itself*.³³

³¹ SKS 22, 79, NB 11, 132/ KJN 6, 75.

³² Socrates like seducer is presented by Alcibiades at the end of the *Symposium*.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, p. 128.

Effectively, Derrida is pointing out a problem that in the case of the Dane is evident: Kierkegaard begins to use the writing like a medium, but he finishes by transforming it into an end in itself. Only with this wrong approach, it becomes exclusively a poison, losing its function of remedy.

Obviously, Derrida's interpretation follows the criticism against the writing that Plato has at the end of his dialogue with the Myth of Thoth. To understand this position better, it is necessary to analyse the other direction of the seductive nature of the writing: The seduction that it means for the readers to comprehend its link with (and its consequences for) Kierkegaard's experience.

The fragment that Derrida analyses is one in which Plato expounds his criticism against the practice of the writing,³⁴ and that can be summarized in three main points: I) Writing is a poison for the memory; II) Writing is an empty repetition, because it blocks the dialogue, then it is silent; III) Writing cannot choose the readers, hence it is vulnerable to every kind of misunderstanding.³⁵ Excluding the first argument that is not relevant for our analysis, the other two points show us the problems that Kierkegaard's writing implies for his readers. Finally, it is convenient to study if the Platonic criticism against writing applies for Kierkegaard too.

Firstly, considering the Platonic disapproval about writing, it is possible to state that Kierkegaard always had the fear that his work, particularly the under-pseudonym books, could be misunderstood by his contemporaries. For this reason, he spent a lot of pages trying to explain the background and the aim of his books to his audience.

Secondly, the discourse is more complex if we reflect about the second Platonic criticism, according to which writing is an empty repetition without meaning, because its function is reduced to consignment, there is no place for dialogue between the author and the reader.³⁶

³⁴ We can find a complete analysis of this problem in Mario Vegetti, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, Torino: Einaudi, 2003, pp. 53-65.

³⁵ Cfr. Carlotta Capuccino, "Il dialogo platonico e la scrittura della filosofia", *PHILOSOPHIA*, 2013, vol. VIII, p. 88.

³⁶ "Writing thus only intervenes at time when a subject of knowledge already possesses the signifieds [*sic*], which are then only given to writing on consignment. [...] Writing would be pure repetition, dead repetition that might always be repeating nothing, or be unable *spontaneously* to repeat itself, which also means unable to repeat anything *but* itself: a hollow, cast-off repetition. [...] Pure repetition, absolute self-repetition, repletion of a self that is already reference and repetition, repetition of the signifier, repetition that is null or annulling, repetition of death – it's all one. Writing is not the living repetition of the living": Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, p. 135 s.

Following this argument, it is relevant to highlight that the Platonic and the Kierkegaardian philosophies have the same contradiction inside: They entrust their thought to writing, but they express their contrariety against it. In both cases, the motivation of this reproach is similar: both try to expose an “example of existential aptitude,” the philosophical one and the Christian one respectively, through a number of written texts; but they know that this “no dynamic” medium is inadequate to communicate an example of life, given that only a practical existential example is proper. In the case of Plato, the true example of the practice of philosophy is Socrates, while for Kierkegaard for the practice of Christianity, it is Jesus.³⁷ It is not a coincidence that Socrates and Jesus did not write even a word during their entire life.

However, according to Llevadot, we must distinguish between Kierkegaard’s and Plato’s writings, because they have different aims:

What Kierkegaard’s writing seeks, unlike Plato’s, is not to provoke the “reminiscence” of the idea, but to be an occasion for the movement of repetition. Writing is not conceived here as a way of transmitting knowledge, as in the case of metaphysical writing, and neither as a way of offering itself as an occasion to reach knowledge, as the case of Platonic writing, but rather as a way of transmitting an existential movement. [...]

Writing-repetition is thus opposed to writing-reminiscence in the sense that it is an ethical or ethical-religious writing that appeals to the reader to do something with his existence, and especially the way of living of temporality. Where reminiscence-writing dreams of access, by the existent, to an eternity outside of time, repetition-writing tries to lead man to experience the moment in which it is possible to live time in its full temporal dimension, instead of continually trying to escape it by way of abstraction or poetic imagination.³⁸

This interesting comparison between the writings of Kierkegaard and Plato explains their differences very well. However, it could be salient to add, considering the Kierkegaardian writing as *pharmakon*, that the Danish

³⁷ Kierkegaard takes on Socrates as an existential example too, but of a person that lived the philosophical aptitude and not the religious one. Then, in this point he is following Plato’s intuition. About the Platonic paradox, see Vegetti, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, p. 53; for the Kierkegaard one, see Rocca, *Kierkegaard*, p. 17. Finally, it is important to underline that Kierkegaard was an avid reader of the Ancient Greek philosophy: Cfr. Rick Anthony Furtak, “Kierkegaard and the Greek Philosophy” in *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippitt and George Pattinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 129-149.

³⁸ Laura Llevadot, “Kierkegaard y Platón: la cuestión de la escritura”, *Convivium*, vol. 20, 2007, pp. 184.

author cannot attain his goal due to the ambiguity of the writing. In fact, even if it is correct that Kierkegaard's repetition-writing tries to seduce the reader to attract him/her into the *moment*, it will be never be realized, because the *repetition* is an interior (existential) movement that does not accept any kind of mediation, including the mediation of writing.

A similar problem occurs regarding the consequences of the writing on Kierkegaard's experience. He was not able to become a Christian, because his writing did not allow him to live in the moment and, consequently, to do a repetition. Then, it is possible to affirm that the readers inevitably have the same problem as the author, they cannot do the repetition if they try to do it with the mediation of a written text. It is possible to link this critical aspect with a concern of Plato himself regarding writing: Writing is dangerous because it could be a way of losing the individuality of the subject.³⁹

To summarize, we can reaffirm the ambiguity of writing understood like pharmakon. It has a positive function, because it attracts the reader towards the example of the Christian lifestyle; but, at the same time, its negative function entails that the reader cannot do the jump towards the faith until he/she abandons writing for trying to jump without mediation.

In other words, writing could be considered as the signpost that indicates the entrance to the religious lifestyle, but at the same time as the limit that does not allow the entrance into it.

Finally, I want to stress again that Kierkegaard and Plato identify the link between writing and mimesis as a critical problem, because, according to them, the mimetic process of the writing is dangerous for the individuality of the subject, who faces the risk of losing it once the writing (and reading) activity is over. It is just the same situation as the gentleman Quijana, who after a deeply involved reading of many poems of chivalry lost his personality and became Don Quixote.⁴⁰ It is likely no coincidence that Kierkegaard reflected for a long time on this literary figure.⁴¹

At this point, I will try to read the Kierkegaardian writing like a Quixotic situation to add a new hermeneutical level of reading in my analysis and to show an example of the possible relevance that my research could have for the Kierkegaardian studies.

³⁹ Cfr. Maurizio A. Iacono. *Autonomia, potere, minorità*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 118.

⁴⁰ Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Madrid: Alfaguara, 2015, pp. 29 ff.

⁴¹ Cfr. Oscar Parceró Oubiña, "Miguel de Cervantes: The Valuable Contribution of a Minor Influence" in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions. Tome III: Literature, Drama and Music*, ed. by Jon Stewart, New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 13-30.

VI. *An Example of Reading Proposal: Kierkegaardian Writing Like a Quixotic Situation*

Though Don Quixote is not a central figure in Kierkegaard's range of literary motifs,⁴² its role is not irrelevant. Hence, the Dane made some allusions to Cervantes and his main character in neuralgic points of his literary career. Without enumerating all the references about Don Quixote, but following Barnett, I want to point out the climax of them, in which Kierkegaard defines his own poetic task as *Quixotic* on the occasion of his literary defense of Christianity.⁴³

Indeed, I agree with Barnett when he affirms that “the Knight-Errant resembles the Truth-Witness and vice versa.”⁴⁴ In addition, when Kierkegaard speaks about the situation of Don Quixote, he is establishing a link with the category of the “Comic,”⁴⁵ which is “present everywhere”⁴⁶ and “always based on a contradiction.”⁴⁷ Then, it is possible to affirm that Kierkegaard considers his religious task as comic, with all the contradictory consequences that this category implies. Obviously, if the whole Kierkegaardian religious task is comic -as well as his life- then also his process of writing necessarily has the same nature.

In accordance with this, I want to focus on the contradictory nature shared by Kierkegaardian writing and Don Quixote's situation, in order to suggest a new reading key: Kierkegaard's activity as writer is a Quixotic situation. More in general, I want to show the similitudes between

⁴² Oscar Parceró Oubiña, “The autonomy of the comic: On Kierkegaard and Don Quixote”, *Kierkegaardiana*, 2007, vol. 24, p. 163.

⁴³ Cfr. Christopher Barnett, “Don Quixote: Kierkegaard and the Relation between Knight-Errant and Truth-Witness” in *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Tome I, ed. by Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016, p. 164. In *SKS* 22, 199, *NB* 12, 103 / *KJN* 6, 199, Kierkegaard writes: “Alas, when I now look at my own life. How rare, indeed, is the person who is so favored for the life of the spirit, and above all strictly schooled with the help of spiritual sufferings: virtually all of my contemporaries see me as fighting like a Don Quixote—it never occurs to them that this is Christianity; indeed, they are convinced that it is just the opposite”.

⁴⁴ Barnett, “Don Quixote: Kierkegaard and the Relation between Knight-Errant and Truth-Witness”, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Oscar Parceró Oubiña, “O Quijote e o cômico na obra de Kierkegaard”, *Ágora. Papeles de filosofía*, 2005, vol. 24, n. 1, p. 166. For my analysis, I follow Oscar Parceró Oubiña, “Comic/Comedy”, in *Kierkegaard's Concepts. Tome II*, ed. by Steven Emmanuel, William McDondal and Jon Stewart, Routledge, New York, 2014, pp. 5-10.

⁴⁶ *SKS* 7, 420 / *CUP* 1, p. 462.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Kierkegaardian writing and Don Quixote's situation. This comparison offers a good basis to develop several hermeneutical lines regarding Kierkegaard's thought. In this context, the reading of writing activity in Kierkegaard as a Quixotic situation gives a practical hermeneutical example of the useful implications of applying the concept of *pharmakon* to Kierkegaardian writing, stressing its contradictory nature.

To start, Kierkegaard lives the contradiction of communicating Christianity in an age of Christendom, which is the negation of Christianity; Don Quixote lives the contradiction of "trying to be a knight-errant in an age when chivalry is dead."⁴⁸ Following this similitude, Kierkegaard's writing would correspond to Quixote's wandering. Hence, both activities fully express the inherent contradiction in their vocations. On one side, it is possible to consider the Kierkegaardian writing like a *pharmakon*, because it works like poison and medication at the same time, that is, it is necessarily contradictory. On the other side, we can consider Quixote's wandering like a *pharmakon* too, because with it he tries to live (and resurrect) chivalry values, but perceiving every time the negative consequences, he concludes each adventure wounded or humiliated. Then, it is, more or less, possible to detect the same contradiction that distinguishes the Kierkegaardian writing.

However, these *pharmaka* are essential for both of them, because they are the only instrument which offer a possibility to realize the existential task that the individual set oneself. Actually, the fact that Kierkegaard has spent *nulla dies sine linea* until his death is proof of that, such as Don Quixote died just after the end of his wandering. At this point, the identification of Kierkegaardian writing as a Quixotic situation should be clear. Then, according to my interpretation, I want to offer a proposal about the relationship between Kierkegaard and Don Quixote. Even if Kierkegaard did not read his entire work using the lens of Don Quixote,⁴⁹ I suggest that it is possible to read at least the writing activity through this lens. In fact, I want to propose reading the Kierkegaardian writing like *pharmakon* as a Quixotic situation.

According to this, I would like to retake Barnett's reading of Don Quixote like "a kind of bridge-character"⁵⁰ between the stages of life,

⁴⁸ Eric Ziolkowski, *The Sanctification of Don Quixote: From Hidalgo to Priest*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, p. 133.

⁴⁹ Cfr. Parceró Oubiña, "Miguel de Cervantes: The Valuable Contribution of a Minor Influence", pp. 23. This reading is confirmed by Kierkegaard in NB 12: 164/ JP2, 1762.

⁵⁰ Barnett, "Don Quixote: Kierkegaard and the Relation between Knight-Errant and Truth-Witness", p. 162.

to try to add other level of interpretation in relation with writing. More precisely, we can consider the writing activity like a bridge-situation, as far as wandering is a bridge-situation for Don Quixote.

Following this reading, in Kierkegaard's case, we can consider the writing activity like a bridge, built by himself, that links the religious lifestyle to the aesthetic lifestyle. This bridge gives him the unique possibility to swing between these two options, but it is a bridge without an exit, because Kierkegaard does not have the capability of choosing between Christ's example or the poetic life. Like a kind of religious Quixote, he becomes addicted to the *pharmakon* and then, he is destined to wander back and forth on the bridge of writing during all his life. The comic paradox lies in the awareness about the impossibility of coming out because of the intrinsic and inherent contradiction of this situation.

Obviously, the only way to leave the bridge is the death of the wanderer while they are wandering, as Kierkegaard's case demonstrates. For Don Quixote, Cervantes chose another end: He died, but only after he has stopped wandering and recovered his mental health. The criticism of Kierkegaard against this literary "happy" ending is not a coincidence, because it completely ignores the comic of Don Quixote's situation and then, lacks coherence because it tries to resolve an irresolvable and intrinsically contradictory situation: "It is, alas, a regrettable error for Servantes to end D. Quixote in such a way that he comes to his senses—and dies. And Servantes, who himself had had the excellent idea of having him become a Schäfer. It ought to end there."⁵¹

Obviously, this ending shows us the limits of the similitude between Kirkegaard's situation and the Quixotic one, but it does not imply that this is an unfertile ground for analysis.

VII. Conclusion

This article contributes some ideas to the open debate about the consideration of Kierkegaard's literary activity, by showing the intrinsic contradiction that it implies.

In fact, the Danish author did not take a clear position because, according to him, writing is something positive and negative at the same time.

⁵¹ SKS 20, 107, NB 170 / KJN 4, 107.

Following this ambivalence, I propose a Derridean interpretation of this topic and I demonstrate that it is coherent with Kirkegaard's literary experience. More precisely, I read Kierkegaardian writing like a *Pharmakon*. Indeed, writing acts as an *existential remedy* for the writer and the reader because it allows for survival, and it introduces the subject to the Christian lifestyle. Simultaneously, it is also an *existential poison* because it impedes the jump of the faith since it is a mediated activity.

Finally, this key of reading can be applied for interpreting Kierkegaard's philosophy. For example, I propose reading Kierkegaardian writing like a Quixotic situation to stress the contradiction that is integral to this activity and the consequences that it implied for Kierkegaard's existential situation.

Obviously, it is only a suggestion among many interpretative possibilities, but it could be worthwhile to deepen this analysis and its implications in successive studies, because the hermeneutical ways opened by my analysis seem very promising and they have not been studied yet.

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