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Disarming the Double: Kant in Defense of Philosophy (1766)

SARAH PORCIAU

INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF THE ENEMY

In 1766, instead of the systematic breakthrough his admirers were anticipating, Immanuel Kant anonymously published his “Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik,” the text whose “scherzender Tiefsinn” provoked Mendelssohn to wonder whether “Hr. Kant die Metaphysik hat lächerlich oder die Geisterseehe glaubhaft machen wollen.”¹ In this peculiar little treatise, Kant draws an analogy between the delusions of spirit-seeing and the abstractions of a speculative metaphysics, with the avowed intention of investigating the former and criticizing the latter. According to this analogy, the occult practice as represented by the famous Swedish spirit-seer Swedenborg—the “spirit-seer” of the title, whose published writings Kant treats in part 2—does little more than drive the groundless fantasies of purely deductive reason to their logical, irrational limit by granting them the pseudoempirical form of ghosts. His engagement with the phenomenon of spirit-seeing thus engenders an urgent call to rid the quest for philosophical truth from the scourge of this unhealthy intimacy, a call for reason to retreat once and for all from the shifting sands of hypothesis and supposition on which the “dreams of metaphysics” rest.

The text itself, however, explicitly refuses to meet this demand head-on. It provides no litmus test for the detection of error. Indeed, in a realm where “Thorheit und Verstand so unkenntlich bezeichnete Grenzen [haben], daß man schwerlich in dem einen Gebiete lange fortgeht, ohne bisweilen einen kleinen Streif in das andre zu thun,” the polemical oppositions that drive the argument show a continual inclination to converge.² Yet, such apparent lapses in philosophical rigor need not be understood as evidence that Kant falls prey to the dilemma he describes. From Kant’s perspective, after all, the rhetorical peculiarities of
his argument serve a crucial pedagogical function: they occur as the inescapable and predictable consequence of a thought process—here, Kant’s own—that purposefully abandons legitimate conceptual territory in favor of an exemplary display of unfettered, speculative reason. By allowing such lapses to permeate his experimental foray into ungrounded, speculative philosophy, Kant hopes to demonstrate concretely the need for a radical revision of the philosophical landscape. As he writes in a letter to Moses Mendelssohn from April 1766:

“Weihn Versuch von der Analogie eines wirklichen sittlichen Einflusses der geistigen Naturen mit der allgemeinen Gravitation ist eigentlich nicht eine ernstliche Meinung von mir sondern ein Beyspiel wie weit man und zwar ungehindert in philosophischen Erdichtungen fortgehen kann wo die data fehlen.”

He thus intends his text in part as an instruction manual of what not to do, a “catarcticon” aimed at “die Scheineinsicht eines verderbten Kopfs” and designed to purge its readers of the temptation to traverse a forbidden, nonempirical ground.

But only in part, for Kant’s explanation, though undoubtedly correct, does not go far enough. The text cannot be so neatly reduced to the status of a pedagogically motivated excursion into the swamplands of sloppy philosophy, and the reader who attempts to penetrate it without deviating from Kant’s explicit instructions will find himself at a considerable disadvantage. Armed only with a notion of absolute authorial authority and controlled semantic slippage, he will be unable to account for the sense of an unnamed and unnamable threat that pervades the entire undertaking, a threat Kant must repeatedly fend off with sudden avalanches of sarcasm and unpredictable detours. The “gefährliche Weg” Kant has chosen for himself and his readers leaves him vulnerable to both public embarrassment (“[d]enn auf eine ernsthafte Art über die Hirngespenster der Phantasten Auslegungen machen zu wollen, gibt schon eine schlimme Vermutung” [348]) and intellectual defilement (“ich habe eine jede blinde Ergebenheit vertilgt, welche sich jemals einschlich, um manchem eingebildeten Wissen in mir Eingang zu verschaffen” [349]). A ludicrous threat with ludicrous consequences, but one that fails to meekly disappear once the conversation turns serious and Kant hauls out the heavy artillery. The kleines Land of human reason must remain constantly vigilant, for despite the disarming absurdity of the hostile forces, the danger of invasion is very real, and the defense of its borders requires all the resources of a legitimate metaphysics.
Perceptive readers, beginning with Kant himself, have always understood the precariousness of the Kantian position, and nearly all have placed the blame on his provocative decision to analogize the visions of ghosts and *Geist*. Once fused together in a relation of similarity—so the story goes—the pull of attraction proves too strong and the situation spins out of control, eventually dragging into its vortex even the temperate voice of an ostensibly bounded philosophy. The methodical quest for a truth without empirical limits inevitably tips over into a delusion so extreme that even the attempt to illustrate the tipping process necessarily falls prey to undisciplined language. The lesson, for the modern reader, tends to resolve itself with astonishing alacrity into the deconstructive truism that philosophy and literature remain ultimately indistinguishable. Even Kant cannot escape the implacable encroachment of *Erdichtung*.

But while both of these statements appear to me to be indisputably true, albeit in a far more limited sense than is often acknowledged by committed proponents of the indistinguishability thesis, I am not at all certain that their truth satisfyingly accounts for the particular brand of encroachment at work in Kant’s text.

In particular, although I have no wish to deny that the dilemma of the text stems in part from the slippery behavior of the Kantian oppositions, I would like to take issue with the notion, apparently espoused even by Kant himself, that the analogous relationship between spirit-seeing and speculative philosophy somehow produces this behavior. Indeed, apart from the shock value it surely carried for an Enlightenment audience, and the pointed barbs aimed at particular practitioners of the two activities, the relationship strikes me as almost completely innocuous, for the simple reason that the disease they have in common can be so tidily confined to the category of “error.” Kant has no intention of trying to rescue speculative philosophy from its own delusions of grandeur and no compulsion to separate the wheat from the chaff before consigning all to the bonfire; the form of philosophy he compares with spirit-seeing is one he would be quite willing to define out of existence entirely: “ich [überzeuge] mich vollkommen, daß selbst die gänzliche Vertilgung aller dieser eingebildeten Einsichten nicht so schädlich seyn könne als die erträumte Wissenschaft mit ihrer so verwünschten Fruchtbarkeit.” Kant can allow himself this razor-sharp distinction between a mode of thought worth annihilating and a metaphysics on which “das wahre und dauerhafte Wohl des Menschlichen Geschlechts” depends because he nowhere attempts to decide between truth and falsehood—a decision he recognizes as impossible,
and therefore dangerous, since it provides no criterion for keeping diseased philosophy in quarantine. What distinguishes “good” philosophy from “bad” is not truth but knowability, where knowability implies the foundation of knowledge in an empirical experience common to all humanity. Philosophical truth is by definition public, demonstrable truth, and all individual “knowledge” divorced from universal empirical experience is by definition *Erdichtung*, no matter how much unrecognizable truth its fiction might contain. Both the philosophy of things spiritual and the phenomenon of spirit-seeing fall into this latter category:

[Der philosophische Lehrbegriff von geistigen Wesen] kann vollendet sein, aber im negativen Verstande, indem er nämlich die Grenzen unserer Einsicht mit Sicherheit festsetzt, und uns überzeugt: daß [. . .] die geistige Natur, welche man nicht kennt, sondern vermutet, niemals positive könne gedacht werden, *weil keine data hiezu in unseren gesamten Empfindungen anzutreffen seien*, und daß man sich mit Verneinungen behelfen müsse, um etwas von allem Sinnlichen so sehr Unterschiedenes zu denken, daß aber selbst die Möglichkeit solcher Verneinungen weder auf Erfahrung, noch auf Schlüssen, sondern auf einer *Erdichtung* beruhe, zu denen eine von allen Hülfsmitteln entblößte Vernunft ihre Zuflucht nimmt. (351–52)\(^{10}\)

It is this opposition between a public, experiential knowability and the lack thereof that grounds and gives content to the more textually prevalent distinction between truth and error. But where error expands to include the undemonstrable as well as the false, all claims to an undemonstrable truth automatically expose themselves as unambiguously untrue. So long as we remain within Kant’s rigorously defined conceptual matrix, truth and fiction will thus show little inclination to converge.

This unproblematic account of the truth-error distinction derives directly from Kant’s own explicitly held conceptual position; yet, it in no way mirrors the spirit of the Kantian text, as we would expect it to do if this relationship were truly the central textual concern. Indeed, the passage cited above, in which Kant provides a precise formulation of the conclusion that eventually sets the matter to rest, appears already toward the end of part 1, thus suggesting that by this relatively early point in the argument, the reader knows as much as he needs to distinguish between truth and error. The second part contains the results of Kant’s investigation into the writings of the Swedish spirit-seer Swedenborg—an investigation that is, in light of the conclusion already reached in the first half, essentially irrelevant to the metaphysical boundary-drawing he announces in the final pages as the “real” purpose of his text (367–68). It would thus appear that something
other than his campaign for a purified metaphysics drives Kant to continue his quest for the significance of ghostly visions, visions he clearly finds dangerous and intriguing enough to merit further study, independent of their analogous relation to an undisciplined philosophy and despite his explicit avowal to the contrary.

Any effort to pinpoint this “something,” this facet of spirit-seeing that forces Kant to complicate an otherwise precise and unambiguous distinction, must therefore in all probability begin with the point at which it diverges from its metaphysical counterpart. Kant analyzes this point in his comparison of the “Träumern der Vernunft” (speculative metaphysicians) and the “Träumern der Empfindung” (spirit-seers). He begins by noting the fundamental similarity that relegates them both to the status of dreamer—both experience private mental images as though they were “real objects” (wahre Gegenstände)—but proceeds to differentiate them according to the entirely different categories of self-deception through which these dreams arise:

[Al]lein wenn man sich einbildet, daß beide Täuschungen übrigens in ihrer Entstehungsart sich ähnlich gnug wären, um die Quelle der einen auch zur Erklärung der andern zureichend zu finden, so betrügt man sich sehr. (343)

Speculative metaphysics emerges here as the known quantity that fails to illuminate the riddle of spirit-seeing. The observer who assigns the two different forms of deception to a single source, based solely on their analogical connection, succumbs to yet another variety of self-deception.

The Hirngespinste, or “brain ghosts,” of speculative metaphysics originate less in an actual deception than in a careless act of forgetting, a “failing to keep in mind,” through which the external, empirical world disappears from the thinker’s mental field of vision. Such a disappearance is never more than provisional, since any significant change in external sensation should suffice to awaken the “waking dreamer” (wachenden Träumer) to the boundary separating internal and external perception, thereby bringing him quite literally to his senses:

Daher können die nämliche Bilder ihn im Wachen wohl sehr beschäftigen, aber nicht betrügen, so klar sie auch sein mögen. Denn ob er gleich alsdenn eine Vorstellung von sich selbst und seinem Körper auch im Gehirne hat, gegen die er seine phantastische Bilder in Verhältniß setzt, so macht doch die wirkliche Empfindung seines Körpers durch äußere Sinne gegen jene Chimären einen Kontrast oder Abstechung, um jene als von sich ausgeheckt, diese aber als empfunden anzusehen. (343)
Spirit-seeing distinguishes itself definitively from such waking dreams by erasing all perception of the elemental “contrast” that marks the border between inside and outside. This erasure stands at the heart of the enigma Kant wishes to unravel:

Von wachenden Träumern sind demnach die Geisterseher nicht bloß dem Grade, sondern der Art nach gänzlich unterschieden. Denn diese referieren im Wachen und oft bei der größten Lebhaftigkeit anderer Empfindungen gewisse Gegenstände unter die äußerliche Stellen der andern Dinge, die sie wirklich um sich wahrnehmen, [. . .] und daher verlange ich, daß man zeige, wie die Seele ein solches Bild, was sie doch als in sich enthalten vorstellen sollte, in ein ganz ander Verhältniß, nämlich in einen Ort äußerlich und unter die Gegenstände, versetze, die sich ihrer wirklichen Empfindung darbieten. (343–44; emphasis in original)

Spirit-seers, unlike philosophers, engage in a second delusion on top of the first: not only do they attribute to their delusions a conceptual, *metaphysical* truth, but they also utterly disregard the nonuniversalizable nature of their experience by asserting its empirical, perceptual reality, in essence demanding public acknowledgment for private dreams. Kant characterizes this spirit-specific aphasia as a process of displacement (*versetzen*) that effectively dissolves the experiential boundaries separating inside from outside, body from mind, self from Other—boundaries that function, for him, as the necessary preconditions for both intersubjective relation and philosophical reflection. It is this moment of willful, hallucinatory transgression, I argue, that transforms spirit-seeing from the readily identifiable illness afflicting a ludicrous philosophy into a virulently contagious epidemic with the power to contaminate every sphere of the text within which Kant hopes to contain it.

**SIDE TRIPS: A MORAL DETOUR AND THE BIRTH OF WORLDS**

After a brief introduction to the philosophical problem posed by the notion of *Geist* (“Ein verwickelter metaphysischer Knoten, den man nach Belieben auflösen oder abhauen kann” [319])—in which he establishes that the word, if it is to have any meaning at all, can only refer to an immaterial, and therefore empirically inaccessible, being—Kant turns to the question of spiritual community. In this section (part 1.2, “Ein Fragment der geheimen Philosophie, die Gemeinschaft mit der Geisterwelt zu eröffnen”), he exploits the speculative techniques of the dogmatic, nonempirical metaphysics he otherwise deplores in order to posit the structure of spiritual worldhood. He eventually arrives at the
notion of a hierarchically organized community, capable of transcen-
ding the “bodily” barriers of distance and delay, and including within its
ranks the mysteriously bifurcated human soul:

Die menschliche Seele würde daher schon in dem gegenwärtigen Leben
als verknüpft mit zwei Welten zugleich müssen angesehen werden, von
welchen sie, so ferne sie zu persönlicher Einheit mit einem Körper ver-
bunden ist, die materielle allein klar empfindet, dagegen als ein Glied der
Geisterwelt die reine Einflüsse immaterieller Naturen empfängt und
ertheilet [. . .] (332)

Once freed through death from its bodily imprisonment, the soul sur-
rrenders its schizophrenic existence and becomes a full citizen of the
spiritual community, which then unveils itself for the first time as a
clear (visual) intuition (“sich ihrem Bewußtsein zum klaren An-
schauen eröffnet” [332]).

There follows an abrupt and explicitly thematized tonal shift, with
which Kant manages to implicitly acknowledge the groundlessness of
his conjectures while simultaneously avoiding the direct condemna-
tion that would put an end to his speculative enterprise:

Es wird nach gerade beschwerlich, immer die behutsame Sprache der
Vernunft zu führen. Warum sollte es mir nicht auch erlaubt sein, im
akademischen Tone zu reden, der entscheidender ist, und so wohl den
Verfasser als den Leser des Nachdenkens überhebt, welches über lang
oder kurz beide nur zu einer verdrießlichen Unentschlossenheit führen
muß. (333)

He continues by ironically pronouncing his spiritual world to be “so
gut als demonstriert,” since it will assuredly be proven at some indefi-
nite point in the future (“ich weiß nicht wo oder wenn”), and a few
lines later announces yet another rupture, this time in the form of a di-
gression—an experiment that “etwas außer meinem Wege liegt”
(333). The experiment will provide support for his theoretical suppo-
sitions by abstracting the probability of a spiritual world from univer-
sally accepted, empirical evidence (“aus irgend einer wirklichen und
allgemein zugestandenen Beobachtung” [333]).

Marked as a detour in the midst of a text full of hairpin turns and
dead ends, the “evidence” in question turns out to be an experience
Kant terms the sittliches Gefühl:

Unter den Kräften, die das menschliche Herz bewegen, scheinen einige
der mächtigsten außerhalb demselben zu liegen, die also nicht etwas als
bloße Mittel sich auf die Eigennützigkeit und Privatbedürfnis, als auf ein
Ziel, das innerhalb dem Menschen selbst liegt, beziehen, sondern welche
machen, daß die Tendenzen unserer Regungen den Brennpunkt ihrer Vereinigung außer uns in andere vernünftige Wesen versetzen [. . .] (334; emphasis in original)

From the peculiar schism that comes to light in the “fact” of human sociability, Kant wants to induce a unified system of spiritual influence, a supernatural spirit community that could be credited with setting in motion the metaphysical mechanics of Gemeinnützigkeit. The hypothetical primary cause is less striking, however, than its universally observable effect, a mysterious force of attraction through which “das Gemüth gegen andere außer sich getrieben oder gezogen wird” (334), in explicit analogy with gravitational pull, and in direct opposition to the resistant forces of an instinctive Eigenheit. For the dynamic described in this passage makes the bifurcation of the human will—what Kant calls the Streit zweier Kräfte—into a precondition of social order. In accordance with the demands of a geheime Macht, the self learns to project its volitional center of gravity beyond the egotistic enclosure that defines its autonomous space. Thus decentered, the self reaches out toward the Other who has destroyed its “natural” equilibrium, and in the gesture of reaching establishes: a public sphere. Just as gravity joins the disparate elements of the material universe together in a cohesive, physical system, so the force of altruism drives isolated individuals to transcend their bodily needs and found a (moral) community.

Dadurch sehen wir uns in den geheimsten Beweggründen abhängig von der Regel des allgemeinen Willens, und es entspringt daraus in der Welt aller denkenden Naturen eine moralische Einheit und systematische Verfassung nach bloß geistigen Gesetzen. (335; emphasis in original)

In addition to speculations about the spirit world, Kant’s little side trip, for which he feels the need to beg his readers’ patience, would thus appear to yield a rudimentary theory of human worldhood, made thinkable by the surrender of the sovereign self.

A surrender in turn made thinkable, as vocabulary such as Herz, Regungen, and Vereinigung suggests, by a paradigm strikingly at odds with the notion of a disembodied spirit world producing purely spiritual laws. For it is the subterranean presence of sexual desire, as a model of physical attraction with the power to transcend the physical, that silently structures the argument in this passage, bridging the analogical gap between gravitational and moral pull and transforming the “allgemein zugestandene[] Beobachtung” (333) into a miniature myth of origin: nature exceeds itself in the direction of the desirable Other and ends up as culture; matter surrenders its physical integrity
and gives birth to metaphysics. Kant makes none of this explicit, and with good reason, since to openly relate the spirit world to the sex drive would seriously compromise the charm (Reiz) of his speculative enterprise, a charm that for him clearly lies in its ability to “explain” the schism between body and soul without sacrificing the autonomy of the latter: “Denn es scheinen in diesem Falle die Unregelmäßigkeiten mehrentheils zu verschwinden, die sonst bei dem Widerspruch der moralischen und physischen Verhältnisse der Menschen hier auf der Erde so befremdlich in die Augen fallen” (335–36).

Yet, the vocabulary of the captivated heart is far more than a rhetorical flourish, as even a brief glance at Kant’s notes from the period shows. These notes, written into the empty spaces of Kant’s personal copy of Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen and dated by scholarly consensus to 1764–66, treat many of the central themes of the Träume, from the foundation of moral unity to the task of metaphysics as a “Wissenschaft von den Schranken der menschlichen Vernunft.”11 They also explicitly attribute to sexual desire the role that Kant’s Träume rather halfheartedly assigns to spirits: “Wir haben selbstnützliche und gemeinnützige Empfindungen. Jene sind älter als diese und die letztere erzeugen sich allererst in der Geschlechterneigung. Der Mensch ist bedürftig aber auch über die Bedürfnisse mächtig” (BB 172).

The laconic pronouncement contains the kernel of Kant’s thinking about the genesis of civilization. Man arrives on the world stage as an instinct-governed automaton, employing his innate capacity for reason only to ensure the efficient and continual satisfaction of his physical needs. With all energy devoted to the goal of satiation, no desire goes long unfulfilled, and primordial man thus exists in a paradisiacal state of (self-)sufficiency and fullness, identified by Kant rather wistfully as the affectless equilibrium of “die Seele in Ruhe” (BB 154). The idyll of self-contained stasis, however, which knows neither excess nor lack, cannot summon the surplus of energy required for a morality of Gemeinnützigkeit; the ethics of the Seele in Ruhe is that of Eigenheit: “Es ist schlimm daß durch diese Moral kein anderer Mensch einen Nutzen hat. (Ausser daß dieses schon große Tugend ist kein Böses zu thun)” (BB 154).

According to Kant, it is the sex drive that decisively disrupts the cyclical closure of the ends/means relationship. This counterintuitive claim rests on an analysis of erotic need as the site of man’s first experiments with the “trick” of sublimation. By removing the object of desire from his immediate grasp, man learns to forestall the “natural” process through which the Other becomes a mere thing to be used and discarded. Imag-
ination, a new and profoundly unparadisiacal mental function, compensates for the absence of the real object with a fantasy of presence that sustains the arc of frustrated desire in its (intentionally) fruitless quest. The result is an idea (“eine von den Eigenschaften dieses triebes ist daß er den idealischen Reitzen wohl zum Grunde liegt [. . .]” [BB 188]), which provides a form of pleasure inaccessible to an instrumental logic of need and satiation: “Der freye Genuß der wollüstigen Neigung u. die unverheilte Entdekung ihres Objects heben alles idealische was über die Neigung kan verbreitet werden auf” (BB 128). What propels the technique of sublimation is thus the discovery of lack-as-power, a uniquely erotic capacity to transcend the dictates of nature (“Der Mensch ist bedürftig aber auch über die Bedürfnisse mächtig” [BB 172]) by purposefully pursuing an absence. In the imaginative (and imaginary) ecstasy of deferral—for Kant, the very essence of sexual desire—lies the origin of a bifurcated humanity, perpetually suspended between the needs of the body and the demands of the desirable Other. And in the structure of a bifurcated humanity lies the origin of “world.”

This “world” does not exhaust itself in the foundation of a moral community. Shortly after introducing the mysterious “Kräfte, die das menschliche Herz bewegen,” Kant simultaneously performs and rejects a digression within a digression by taking the time to announce to his readers what he will not take the time to discuss:

Ich halte mich bei dem Triebe nicht auf, vermöge dessen wir so stark und so allgemein am Urtheile anderer hängen und fremde Billigung oder Beifall zur Vollendung des unsrigen von uns selbst so nöthig zu sein erachten, [. . .] welches alles vielleicht eine empfundene Abhängigkeit unserer eigenen Urtheile vom allgemeinen menschlichen Verstande ist, und ein Mittel wird, dem Ganzen denkender Wesen eine Art von Vernunft einheit zu verschaffen. (334; emphasis in original)

On the strength of this passage, there can be no mistaking the structural parallels between the intellectual worldhood Kant chooses not to treat and the moral worldhood he describes; whether the Einheit in question is that of reason or ethics, the principle of decentered agency remains the same. Despite his refusal to elaborate, a perfectly adequate depiction of the principle at work in the realm of Vernunft can be found in the opening lines of the fourth section, where Kant proclaims a desire to purge his reasoning process of the first-person biases that have afflicted his previous chapters. He declares a new method, the mind here taking the place of heart and will in a movement of self-transcendence otherwise wholly familiar:
Sonst betrachtete ich den allgemeinen menschlichen Verstand blos aus dem Standpunkte des meinigen: jetzt setze ich mich in die Stelle einer fremden und äußeren Vernunft, und beobachte meine Urtheile sammt ihren geheimsten Anlässen aus dem Gesichtspunkte anderer. (349)

The reversal of perspective occurs in accordance with a principle of fair business practice, which dictates that a merchant’s scale be calibrated such that the weights and the wares can switch pans. Kant, who desires his text to participate in the fair and open exchange of the conceptual marketplace, has decided to switch the pans. Instead of thinking his way from the inside out, observing the external environment from the safety of his ego-governed island, he will now project his mental center beyond his own boundaries until he stands on the outside looking in. The reversal will render conspicuous the ego-based biases that have thus far prevented his thought process from participating fully in the universal unity of reason; it will ensure for his future efforts the perfect symmetry, transparency, and equilibrium of judgment associated with the objectivity of “world.”

All the more ironic, then, that the gesture itself should be rooted in the radical asymmetry, in the enigmatic imbalance, of the decentered self. As in the previous passage on the moral Other, Kant speaks here of an external power that must outweigh the natural forces of self-love and self-sufficiency to make possible the profoundly unnatural maneuver he has in mind. He goes on to further undermine the deceptive simplicity of his marketplace metaphors with an optical image of corrective distortion:

Die Vergleichung beider Beobachtungen giebt zwar starke Parallaxen, aber sie ist auch das einzige Mittel, den optischen Betrug zu verhüten, und die Begriffe an die wahre Stellen zu setzen, darin sie in Ansehung der Erkenntnísvermögen der menschlichen Natur stehen. (349)

Only with the help of a perspectival inaccuracy, an act of displacement that projects the self into the territory of a “fremden und äußeren Vernunft,” can rational concepts hope to assume their properly objective position within the public realm of human knowledge. It is hard to imagine a more precise formulation of the paradox that grounds Kant’s notion of world.

SEEING DOUBLE: PHILOSOPHY IN THE FUNHOUSE

Having exploited to his satisfaction the “empirical” evidence of the human heart, Kant concludes his digression and returns conscien-
tiously to his “previous path” (337). From this point onward, the chapter progresses without interruption toward its true “goal”—the unraveling of the as-yet unbroached mystery of spirit-seeing—in a manner that suggests a carefully orchestrated anticlimax. Kant’s long-awaited explanation manages to belittle the spirit-seeing phenomenon even while condescendingly granting it a certain degree of unrecognizable and therefore erroneous truth.

Since his own hypothesis suggests that spirits are both ubiquitous and influential, Kant must first confront the surprising rarity of spirit-seeing phenomena. To do this, he reiterates and expands on the theory of the bifurcated subject, maintaining that the subject, as a citizen of the spirit world, communicates constantly with disembodied spirits to which it has absolutely no access as an embodied citizen of the natural world. Under normal circumstances, the subject never becomes conscious of its divided state, experiencing bifurcation only indirectly as a discrepancy between natural and moral impulses. Occasionally, however, the two halves of the soul are joined by a mysterious capacity to transmit metaphorical messages—immaterial communications encoded in the language of bodily representation “nach dem Gesetz der vergesellschafteten Begriffe” (338). Since these messages were never intended for embodied consumption, and since the capacity to receive them rests, for Kant, on a disruption in the equilibrium of the nervous system, it is perhaps not surprising that those minds unhealthy enough to experience such abnormally vivid visions so frequently mistake them for literal, empirical encounters. Kant emphatically dismisses the idea that this mistake could be rectified and the metaphors decoded to arrive at real, empirical knowledge of the spirit world: “die geistige Empfindung [wird] nothwendig so genau in das Hirngespenst der Einbildung verwebt, daß es unmöglich sein muß in derselben das Wahre von den groben Blendwerken, die es umgeben, zu unterscheiden” (340). No criterion exists for separating the supersensory truth from the pseudoempirical falsehood; these visions therefore fall into the category of Erdichtung and cannot be taken seriously as material for philosophical reflection. Kant ends the chapter by painting the odd, diseased power of the spirit-seers as a form of real worldly impotence, equivalent to the physical blindness that enabled Tiresias’ second sight, and involving the loss of a rational capacity badly needed within the realm of material existence.

The passing reference to Tiresias, however, threatens to undermine the very position Kant intends it to illustrate, for it bears subtle witness to a far more disturbing interpretation of the spirit-seeing phenomenon.
than the emphasis on physical infirmity would seem to allow. Tiresias, after all, as Kant was well aware, receives his second sight less as a gift than as punishment for a most peculiar form of sexual deviance—one involving his capacity to experience sexual relations as a woman.13 And this fact, belonging as it does to the hidden but nonetheless still perceptible backdrop of the Kantian discussion, suggests a rather different way of conceptualizing the extreme and unnatural Reizbarkeit by which spirit-seers supposedly distinguish themselves from a healthy humanity: could it be that Kant recognizes in spirit-seeing less an arbitrary physical malfunction than a perversion of the very same desirous relation on which worldhood depends?

Kant intends his third chapter (part 1.3, “Antikabbala. Ein Fragment der gemeinen Philosophie, die Gemeinschaft mit der Geisterwelt aufzuheben”) as an unequivocal renunciation of his previously tolerant (and highly speculative) tone: “die Folge, die sich aus diesen Betrachtungen ergiebt [. . .] [macht] die tiefe Vermutungen des vorigen Hauptstücks ganz entbehrlich” (347). Punctuated by a series of dismissive gestures, from the polemical irony of the title to the concluding identification of spirits and digestive gas (348),14 the text makes a rhetorical case for the philosophical nullity of the dilemma it investigates. In argumentative terms, however, this “new” account of spirit-seeing, explicitly offered as an alternative to the spirit-world hypothesis, reads less like a refutation than a refinement.15 Proposed but not developed in chapters 1 and 2, the notion of spirit-seeing as physical disease receives here a mechanico-medical concretization that confirms the original diagnosis of sensory delusion—together with the suspicion of world-destroying, Tiresian deviance. The resulting hypothesis is so alarming that the dispassionate tone in which Kant delivers it produces an impression of almost deliberate perversity.

He begins with a theory of optical perception, shortly thereafter expanding it to include the aural:

Hiebei wird es sehr wahrscheinlich: daß unsere Seele das empfundene Objekt dahin in ihrer Vorstellung versetze, wo die verschiedene Richtungslinien des Eindrucks, die dasselbe gemacht hat, wenn sie fortgezogen werden, zusammenstoßen [. . .] Dieser Punkt, welchen man den Sehepunkt nennt, ist zwar in der Wirkung der Zerstreuungspunkt, aber in der Vorstellung der Sammlungspunkt der Direktionslinien, nach welchen die Empfindung eingerückt wird (focus imaginarius). (344; emphasis in original)

Actual, empirical perception can be differentiated from mental perception, or fantasy, by the location of the “focus imaginarius,” which in the
former case appears outside the body, and in the latter inside the mind. Kant therefore proposes to explain the phenomenon of spirit-seeing as an act of involuntary displacement, whereby the visionary wrongly projects the “focus imaginarius” of his internal fantasy onto his external environment:

Wenn ich also setze, daß durch irgend einen Zufall oder Krankheit gewisse Organen des Gehirnes so verzogen und aus ihrem gehörigen Gleichgewicht gebracht seien, daß die Bewegung der Nerven [. . .] nach solchen Richtungslinien geschieht, welche fortgezogen sich außerhalb dem Gehirne durchkreuzen würden, so ist der focus imaginarius außerhalb dem denkendes Subjekt gesetzt, und das Bild, welches ein Werk der bloßen Einbildung ist, wird als ein Gegenstand vorgestellt, der den äußeren Sinnen gegenwärtig ware. (346)

To comprehend the cause for a consternation Kant nowhere expresses, we need only recall the precise formulations he employs in the previous chapter to describe the odd behavior of the human heart: “die Tendenzen unserer Regungen [versetzen] den Brennpunkt ihrer Vereinigung außer uns in andere vernünftige Wesen” (334; emphasis in original). Or again, a few lines later: “der Punkt, wohin die Richtungslinien unserer Triebe zusammenlaufen, ist also nicht bloß in uns, sondern [. . .] in dem Wollen anderer außer uns” (335). The necessary conclusion is obvious enough to be unavoidable, despite that Kant defiantly avoids it: the hypothesis he propounds to solve the riddle of the spirit-seers’ delusions exactly duplicates the structure of desire that grounds his notion of world.16

The difference between the two resides, of course, in the ontological status of the Other toward which the self strays. The spirit-seer first generates a phantasmagoric Other and then projects him(self) onto his real environment, in an act of self-aggrandizing solipsism and perverted, Narcissian passion that undermines the principle of Geselligkeit at its very core. Moral and rational man, on the other hand, errs productively toward a real Other, thereby forging a “healthy” erotic relation that opens onto the public space of morality and objective reason. One displacement sets the stage for the infinite divergence of delusional desire; the other errs only to bring the wanderer, now world-weary and wise, back home to roost (“Courage, meine Herren, ich sehe Land!” [368]), where he can revel contentedly in the deeper, more nuanced, and, above all, more self-conscious version of his originary, self-sufficient simplicity. The former alternative describes the world-destroying pretensions of self-proclaimed prophets and mad-
men. The latter, according to Kant, describes the displacement his own text rhetorically performs when it traverses the forbidden terrain of *Erdichtung* to arrive at the simple wisdom of a *durch Erfahrung gereifte Vernunft*, which alone can legitimately and definitively pronounce the prohibition against precisely such excursions:

Vorher wandelten wir wie Demokrit im leeren Raume, wohin uns die *Schmetterlingsflügel* der Metaphysik gehoben hatten, und unterhielten uns daselbst mit geistigen Gestalten. Jetzt, da die *stiptische Kraft der Selbsterkenntnis* die seidene Schwingen zusammengezogen hat, sehen wir uns wieder auf dem niedrigen Boden der Erfahrung und des gemeinen Verstandes; glücklich! wenn wir denselben als unseren angewiesenen Platz betrachten, aus welchem wir niemals ungestraft hinausgehen, und der auch alles enthält, was uns befriedigen kann, so lange wir uns am Nützlichen halten. (368; emphasis in original)

The Kantian text thus conscientiously traces the tripartite teleological arc long familiar to contemporary readers as the Idealist circle, according to which human history must first pass through an intermediary stage of disharmony and conflict before circling back to take on the contours of a redeemed paradisiacal condition—a paradisiacal condition defined, in Kantian terms, by the absolute equality of a desexualized humankind. The Eden to come will dispense with the asymmetry of desire.17

There remains, however, the rather crucial question of how to tell the two modes of erring apart. Who will pass judgment on the ontological status of the Other? Even in the simplest case, in which we assume the object of moral or rational desire to coincide with a specific, empirical Other (one of the *andere vernünftige Wesen* who hold such sway over the human heart), the worldhood-founding structure of infinitely deferred desire still demands that this Other remain inaccessible, foreign, and thus ultimately, decisively absent. And then there are the notions like *geheime Macht* and *allgemeine Wille*, which play precisely the same role as the *andere vernünftige Wesen* without ever laying claim to demonstrable empirical existence. Indeed, Kant never actually defines the relationship between these abstract, theoretical Others and the particular, erotically charged Other whose function they perform. Are they hypothetical constructs, standing in for the unknowable origins of real, experiential forces? Are they the sublimated forms abstracted from the numerical totality of specific, empirical Others? And—most important—how is the universal Other who gives the self moral commands, or the rational Other from whose perspec-
tive the self can recognize its biases, more definitively real than the
spiritual Others of the visionaries? Who will keep these legitimate and
necessary, but ultimately undemonstrable, Others from degenerating
into an egocentric projection if they are subject to no objective law
and it is the self, in the end, who must posit them?

Kant’s own attempt to separate the dreamers from the waking world
depends on his notion of experience as necessarily universalizable, a
notion that naturally excludes the essentially private adventures of the
visionaries.

Aristoteles sagt irgendwo: Wenn wir wachen, so haben wir eine gemein-
schaftliche Welt, träumen wir aber, so hat ein jeder seine eigne. Mich
dünkt, man sollte wohl den letzteren Satz umkehren und sagen können:
wen wnn von verschiedenen Menschen ein jeglicher seine eigene Welt hat, so
ist zu vermuten, daß sie träumen. (342; emphasis in original)

With the help of an erroneously attributed citation (the sentence actu-
ally stems from Heraclitus, as numerous readers have observed), Kant
here introduces the notion of a private world, of a world without world-
hood, as the criterion par excellence for distinguishing real delusion
from fantastic and improbable truth. Real, nonhallucinatory experi-
ence must be inherently accessible to all humankind, and there is
therefore no such thing as an empirical vision that remains in prin-
ciple unavailable to the less spiritually privileged masses. Stipulations,
however, do not suffice as criteria for separation, and this text—unlike
the much later Kritik der reinen Vernunft—provides no account of
experience that would allow Kant to argue for anything more than a
wholly contingent generality “induced,” like the law of gravitation,
from a necessarily finite number of individual, subjective encounters
with empirical phenomena. To function as an effective philosophical
weapon, experience must be understood as the necessarily universal-
izable product of a single world. The single-world theory provided by
the Träume, however, relies on the very structure of straying that the
notion of universalizable experience was intended to guarantee, the
very structure that the similarity between spirit-seeing and Sittlichkeit
emphatically calls into question. Kant’s invocation of experience as a
criterion for distinguishing between the real and hallucinatory Others
thus sets in motion an obvious and unhelpful circle that cannot be em-
ployed to disqualify the spirit-seers’ claims.

The lack of a conclusive criterion for distinction between delusional
visions and philosophical norms suggests that the potential degenera-
tion of “healthy” worldhood may in fact be built into the structure of
desire it shares with the diseased worldlessness of the spirit-seers, and thus into its very condition of possibility. Spirit-seeing, as the delusional but empirical double of responsible, altruistic relation, mockingly destabilizes Kant’s unequivocal affirmation of a universal yet empirically grounded worldhood as the precondition for all moral behavior and philosophical truth, thereby posing a threat he can neither ignore nor definitively disarm. From the preface onward, the responsible speech of wisdom vies heroically with the wildfire of empty talk—“gemeine Gerüchte” (317), “methodisches Geschwätz” (319), “Hörensagen” (357), “lärrende Lehrverfassungen” (373)—set in motion by the spurious claims of spirit-seers and false philosophers. The humility, simplicity, and egalitarian inclusiveness of a wisdom rooted in experience and the gemeinen Verstand (“die wahre Weisheit ist die Begleiterin der Einfalt [...] und ihre Zwecke bedürfen nicht solcher Mittel, die nimmermehr in aller Menschen Gewalt sein können” [372]) face down the fanatical self-regard of those who would claim private access to the extraordinary and the exceptional. And the usefulness of a universal knowledge, acquired in accordance with the principles of fair intellectual exchange, distinguishes itself from the economic exploitation practiced by the peddlers of supersensible absurdities (“die Schlüssel, welche die beide Pforten der anderen Welt aufthun, öffnen zugleich sympathetisch die Kasten der gegenwärtigen” [317]). Such carefully polemical oppositions point the way to a rhetorical battle being waged less for the integrity of philosophy than for the philosophical control of a disputed public sphere. Kant picks a quarrel with spirit-seeing to salvage the communal space of worldhood from the debased, exploitative vacuum it has, with the help of the visionaries, become. But in a situation where exploitation and rumor have become the norm, the necessarily nonauthoritative voice of responsible worldhood stands little chance of being heard. The Boden der Erfahrung und des gemeinen Verstandes may be open to everyone, but in its paradoxically u-topic ubiquity, it remains ultimately less grounded than the Bodenlosigkeit of a corrupt public sphere from which it cannot, in any case, be definitively distinguished.

CONCLUSION: PHILOSOPHY FORTIFIED, ETHICS EXPELLED

The triumphant conclusion, then, in which Kant announces the boundary-drawing, boundary-defending project of a legitimate philosophy, proclaims as vanquished an enemy he has never precisely iden-
tified and cannot, with any degree of certainty, keep separate from the experience-based worldhood he sets out to defend. In the absence of any a priori, apodictic ground, the worldhood of the Träume depends entirely on the self’s capacity to transgress its own boundaries, to go in search of the Other in an act of deviation that has structurally and substantively far more in common with the erroneous path of Erdich-tung than with the tautological certainty of the truth it supposedly renders communicable. Any boundaries established to exclude the visionary perversions on the basis of their necessarily erroneous character must, under these conditions, simultaneously exclude all striving toward the notion of world per se—a state of affairs that makes the Kantian solution look rather like a thinly veiled decision to leave the corrupted battlefield to the enemy and beat a desperate retreat back to the self-identical stronghold of a premoral, prerational simplicity. The new, bounded space of philosophy, “aus welchem wir niemals ungestraft hinausgehen, und der auch alles enthält, was uns befriedigen kann” (368), differs, in this sense, surprisingly little from the garden of paradisiacal immanence our biblical forefathers left behind as they began their journey in the direction of moral and rational worldhood. Indeed, after all that straying, it may well be that the only thing distinguishing our new situation from our originarily, instinct-governed condition is the exclamatory “glücklich!” and its ostentatious affirmation of a status quo in which we will no longer bother to reach out toward the tree of knowledge, or the absent object of our sublimated desires. Henceforth, all will take place within the self-enclosed circle of a solipsistic Selbstbefriedigung.19

Such philosophical asceticism, however, must relinquish the right to pass moral or rational judgments on the world it has abandoned, and it is indeed precisely this profoundly un-Kantian stance that Kant affirms when he concludes his discussion with the words of Candide: “Laßt uns unser Glück besorgen, in den Garten gehen, und arbeiten!” (373). Candide utters these words only after making one final, failed attempt to bestow some meaning on his profoundly chaotic experience, an attempt that involves disturbing the hermithood of his neighbor, the Turkish mystic. Their conversation proceeds as follows:

Pangloss acted as spokesman, and they asked him: “Master, we have come to beg you to tell us why so curious a creature was ever created.” “And what has it to do with you?” answered the dervish. “Is it any business of yours?” “But surely, Reverend Father,” said Candide, “there is a dreadful amount of evil in the world.” “And what does it matter,” said the
dervish, “if there is evil or if there is good? When His Highness the Sultan sends a ship to Egypt, does he worry whether the mice on board are comfortable or not?” —“So what must we do?” said Pangloss. —“Keep your mouth shut,” said the dervish.\footnote{20}

Candide points to the existence of evil; the dervish responds with a renunciation of ethics. Candide’s decision to withdraw, on the dervish’s advice, into the prelapsarian peace of his garden must thus be read in its original context as a movement in consonance with the dervish’s silent, stubbornly amoral asceticism, and hence as a flight from the ethical demands of a worldly existence. As such, the decision provides Kant with a perfectly appropriate moral for a distinctly precritical didactic tale, one that effectively dictates the exclusion of the ethical relation. In the high-pitched moralistic tone of his final pages, sententious references to humility, wisdom, honesty, contentment, maturity, nobility, dignity, usefulness, uprightness, and hope—all affiliated with the virtuous renunciation of spiritual *Eitelkeit*—proliferate at an astonishing rate to describe a practice of boundary-drawing that substitutes, for the communal morality it necessarily excludes, a morality grounded in the exclusionary act itself. Preaching the surrender of otherworldly vanities, Kant’s rhetorical crusade performs what at first appears to be merely a witty reversal of the Christian message—until we realize that Kantian worldhood, as the rational and ethical community of mankind, belongs among the spiritual vanities we are expected to surrender. The unstable power of a heart divided, and the public space it discloses as a distinctly human possibility, are here quietly pronounced incompatible with the tyranny of a reunified and fully instrumentalized reason, a reason whose unrelenting *usefulness* leaves no room for the detour of desire that would drive the self toward an ungraspable Other, and thus no room, within the parameters of the text, for the uniquely moral rejection of a logic founded solely on means and ends. Henceforth, a legitimate philosophy will tolerate only that “*moralische Glaube*, [. . .] welcher einzig und allein dem Menschen in jeglichem Zustande angemessen ist, indem er ihn ohne Umschweif zu seinen wahren Zwecken führt” (373)\footnote{21}—without a detour. Not until the advent of the critical project will Kant be able to pronounce this dictum without simultaneously demanding the abolition of world.

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NOTES

5. The phrase introduces a Virgil citation that links the Kantian “journey” to the epic tradition of a perilous descent into the underworld (329). The notion of the spirit world as underworld, suggested by the three Virgil citations sprinkled throughout the text, provides a significant contrast to the insistent lightheartedness of the more prevalent imagery of empty heights.
7. For a particularly nuanced, though perhaps overly elastic, version of this claim, see Weissberg 34–91. For an understanding of the “convergence theory” closer to my own, see Goetschel 89–114.
9. Ibid.
10. Emphasis added.
12. For a reading of Kant’s optical imagery—and spirit-related speculations—in mediahistorical context, cf. Andriopoulos.
13. Shell (351–52) points out in an endnote that a reference to the sexual origins of Tiresias’ condition can be found in Kant’s “Bemerkungen.” She goes on to link Tiresias’ effectively androgynous state to the visionary’s intermediary position between two worlds, and notes that, for Kant, sexual maturity is a precondition for madness ("there being ‘no such thing as a deranged child’").
14. In the following chapter, Kant reverses the polemical thrust of this literalization (pneuma in Greek, animus in Latin, and ruach in Hebrew all famously mean wind as well as spirit) by coming down on the side of those who would see evidence of spirits where others see only hot air (350–51).
15. The second and third chapters cannot, in actuality, conflict with one another, since the explanations they provide operate at different causal levels: the former proposes a possible primary cause, the latter a mechanical one.
The suggestion that the third chapter renders the second dispensable does not, therefore, imply that the empiricism of the third chapter somehow annuls the (entirely different) explanatory value of the speculative second, but rather that Kant intends to set the reader free from the infinite regress generated by the search for supersensible rather than mechanical causes. Newton, he notes, performs a similar reduction by concentrating on the workings rather than the “whys” of gravitational force (335).

16. Hartmut and Gernot Böhme (255–57) also take note of a resemblance between Kant’s description of moral feeling and the delusional projections of spirit-seeing. They read this resemblance as a threat to the absolute autonomy of reason, and conclude that Kant later discards the paradigm of desire in order to reinstate the hegemonic power of the rational self. According to my reading, however, what the similarity between spirit-seeing and moral feeling endangers is precisely not the autonomy of reason, but rather the possibility of a relation in which autonomy of all kinds is reciprocally and noncoercively limited, that is, the relation of worldhood. Although it is certainly true that Kant ultimately inscribes the autonomy of reason at the very center of the critical system, I argue that the impetus behind this shift lies not in a psychologically motivated preference for autonomy per se, but in the philosophically motivated realization that only autonomy can provide a truly stable (that is, apodically necessary) foundation for the reciprocal limitation of autonomy that takes place in the moral sphere.


18. In the critical period, the tension between the desire to transcend a necessarily tautological self and the a priori universalizability required to distinguish this transcendence from lunacy leaves behind the dichotomy of empirical relation and nonempirical solipsism, in which Kant remains trapped in the Träume, and takes shape as the problem of the synthetic a priori. In the Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (1785), Kant credits his shift away from moral feeling (empirical, and thus synthetic, but not apodictically binding) toward moral law (both synthetic and apodictic) with rescuing morality from the realm of chimera: “Daß nun Sittlichkeit kein Hirngespenst sei, welches aldann folgt, wenn der kategorische Imperativ und mit ihm die Autonomie des Willens wahr und als ein Prinzip a priori schlechtherdings notwendig ist, erfordert einen möglichen synthetischen Gebrauch der reinen praktischen Vernunft” (Werke 4: 445; emphasis in original). For the historical context of Kant’s turn toward the transcendental, cf. Zammito, who argues that “Kant created the ‘critical philosophy’ at the cost of forsaking the ‘science’ of anthropology” (348).

19. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the two opposing forces described in the second chapter as the product of mankind’s dual citizenship in a spiritual and material world—forces that can be unified only through the death of the subject—reappear here slightly transformed as the opposing forces of human thought, which can be unified through the renunciatory gesture of withdrawal from spiritual “vanities”: “Auf solche Art fließen endlich zwei Bestrebungen von so unähnlicher Natur in eine zusammen, ob sie gleich anfangs nach sehr verschiedenen Richtungen ausgingen. Denn um vernünftig
zu wählen, muß man vorher selbst das Entbehrliche, ja das Unmögliche ken-
nen; aber endlich gelangt die Wissenschaft zu der Bestimmung der ihr durch
die Natur der menschlichen Vernunft gesetzten Grenzen” (369). If we take this parallel seriously, the boundary-drawing withdrawal Kant here affirms with such moralizing vehemence assumes the character of a metaphorical death (the death of the human desire to transcend the self), a situation that casts further doubt on the self-congratulatory tone of the final pages.

21. Second emphasis added.

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