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## Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts

Ziolkowski, Eric, Garff, Joakim, Jøthen, Peder, Rovira, James

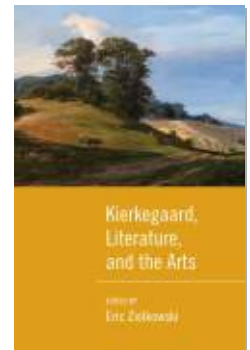
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# Part I



*Literature*



# The Bonfire of the Genres

## Kierkegaard's Literary Kaleidoscope

George Pattison

In reflecting on Kierkegaard's relation to literature and the arts, two tasks immediately present themselves. The first is to see how he himself related to the literature and other arts of his own time as reader or recipient. The second is to see how he then contributed to his cultural world, specifically as a writer. It is to these two tasks that this essay offers a preliminary contribution.

That Kierkegaard might be read in the perspective of literature and the arts is no new discovery. An early reviewer of *Either/Or* commented that its message would be clear to those "who have followed the many branchings of modern literature, not so much in the realm of pure academic study, but in the sphere of belles-lettres," while another compared it (favorably) with the novels of Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Eugène Sue.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent commentators in the Danish and German traditions have always been well placed to recognize that many of the questions addressed in various of Kierkegaard's writings were precisely the kinds of questions that constituted the core agendas of Romanticism and literary modernism in their own traditions, and it was no accident that the first significant monograph on Kierkegaard, Brandes's 1877 "Critical Presentation," was the work of a literary critic rather than of a philosopher or theologian.<sup>2</sup> In English, too, the earliest articles about Kierkegaard situated him in relation to literary modernism, primarily Ibsen and Nietzsche, but with references also to Flaubert, Renan, Carlyle, Emerson, Dostoevsky, and Wagner.<sup>3</sup> This last name reminds us of the importance of music to Kierkegaard, evidenced not least by the essay in *Either/Or* on *Don Giovanni*, which, recent research has shown, was curiously influenced by none other than Richard Wagner!<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Kierkegaard has not only been compared with one or another literary figure or claimed for one or another literary movement but has himself entered into the symbolic world of several major modern novelists, including Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann. (In the latter's *Doctor Faustus*, it is while the composer Adrian Leverkühn is reading Kierkegaard's essay on *Don Giovanni* that Mephistopheles first appears, and Kierkegaardian themes of angst and the demonic permeate the novel.) Several major poets too have been receptive to a certain Kierkegaardian influence, notably W. H. Auden and R. S. Thomas.<sup>5</sup>

## Kierkegaard's Response to the Arts of Denmark's Golden Age

Turning to Kierkegaard himself, what gradually become more and more apparent are the sheer scale and variety of his engagement with literature and the arts. The early studies on Faust, Don Juan, the Wandering Jew, and folk literature are well known, but the same journals also witness extensive notes on the poetry of the troubadours<sup>6</sup>—among the longest reading notes anywhere in the journals. He also offers an extensive essay on how to tell stories to children (*SKS* 17:122–33, *BB*:37, n.d. 1837 / *KJN* 1:116–25). Although there are few significant discussions of contemporary Danish poetry, notes suggest he took a keen interest in this and was especially admiring of Christian Winther (*SKS* 20:34, *NB*32, n.d. 1846 / *JP* 5:5909).<sup>7</sup> Eric Ziolkowski has recently drawn attention to the importance of Aristophanes—an enthusiasm Kierkegaard shared with Early Romanticism<sup>8</sup>—while Thomas Miles has written of Horace as “one of the earliest and longest lasting of Kierkegaard’s influences.”<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard’s first publication was essentially a review of a novel by Hans Christian Andersen (*SKS* 1:15–57 / *FPOSL* 61–102), while another contemporary Danish novelist, Madame Thomasine Gyllembourg, was the focus for the review known by the title of the novel in question, *Two Ages* (*To Tidsaldre*, 1845). There are also notes for a review of one of Scandinavia’s first feminist novels, *Clara Raphael*<sup>10</sup> (*SKS* 24:136–38, *NB*22:63, n.d. 1850 / *KJN* 8:133–34). Drama, too, was central to his writing about literature. As well as the essay on Scribe’s *The First Love* in *Either/Or* and the justly celebrated eulogy of Mme Heiberg’s stagecraft (*SKS* 14: 93–107 / *CCLA* 301–25), the journals contain a more or less complete celebration of another contemporary giant of the Danish stage, J. L. Phister, in the comic role of Captain Scipio, a tipsy Vatican police captain (*SKS* 16:125–43 / “PCS” 327–44). Published and unpublished works also contain a vast number of brief allusions, full-blown references, and occasional extensive discussions of plays and playwrights. The great Danish playwright Ludvig Holberg is among the most cited of all Kierkegaard’s sources, and such contemporaries as Johan Ludvig Heiberg are also frequently mentioned.<sup>11</sup> Sophocles and Shakespeare provide occasions for extensive reflections on the nature of tragedy, as well as images and scenarios with which to explore psychological traumas that may have been Kierkegaard’s own.<sup>12</sup> In a quite different register, the farces of the Austrian writer Johann Nestroy provide the pseudonym Constantin Constantius with an opportunity to test whether repetition is possible (*SKS* 4:29–43 / *R* 154–69). The essay on *Don Giovanni* has already been mentioned, but Kierkegaard published a further short review of a contemporary performance of the opera, and there are passing references to, for example, guitar playing and ballet.

It is only in the case of the visual arts that Kierkegaard seems to have been lacking an all-around and in-depth familiarity with classic and contemporary material. When pictures do enter his work, they are not, for the most part,

examples of great art. We might think of the use of the trick picture of Napoleon's grave in *The Concept of Irony* (SKS 1:80–81 / CI 19; see SKS K1:169 for illustration) or the reference to a copperplate print of sea-maidens (i.e., waves that seem to take the shape of female figures) in the essay on *Don Giovanni* (SKS 2:97 / EO 1:92; see SKS K2:129 for illustration). Of course, the Church of Our Lady, where he regularly worshipped and occasionally spoke, housed a collection of statues of the apostles by Europe's greatest living sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen, but although many passages of his later religious writings seem unmistakably to allude to the all-dominating statue of Christ, this is never commented on with regard to its artistic quality.<sup>13</sup> Here, however, we should be mindful of André Malraux's caution that, until the advent of quality color reproductions in the mid-nineteenth century and of easier travel access to the great sites and museums of Western art, even the most influential critics and theorists were, by our contemporary standards, familiar with only a few great works or with black-and-white reproductions.<sup>14</sup> Had Kierkegaard, like many of his artist contemporaries, traveled to Italy, we might have had some very different visual records from his pen.<sup>15</sup> His keen observation of scenes from daily life, his ability to conjure forth word pictures, and the extraordinary plasticity of his style in both aesthetic and religious works are well known, while notes from 1846 offer a remarkable meditation on the nature of color (SKS 27:369, Papir 344:3 / JP 3:2844). It is therefore clear that he was not lacking in visual intelligence, only that, in this case, he did not find a corresponding range of artistic works through which to develop, express, and interpret what and how he saw.

It is very tempting to scholars to see Kierkegaard's relation to literature primarily in terms of reading, and the roll call of writers whom he read is impressive. He cites Holberg, Goethe, Shakespeare, and other great dramatists at will. But we must also remember that he was an avid theatergoer. When, as he describes in *The Point of View*, he let himself be seen nightly at the theater so as to give the impression that he was nothing but a *flâneur* and loungeur, the ruse could work only in a context in which he was known to be a regular member of the audience at Copenhagen's Royal Theater, and it is in relation to performances at this theater that the review of *The First Love*, the note on the seduction of Zerlina, the commentary on Madame Heiberg's stagecraft, and the portrayal of Captain Scipio by Herr Phister were all written. This theater therefore deserves special mention in relation to Kierkegaard's experience of literature and the arts.<sup>16</sup> By modern standards, it staged an extraordinary range of productions. In the 1831 season, from September 1 to May 31, there were approximately one hundred different productions, from across the whole range of theatrical genres, including both works by "the greats" and contemporary light entertainments. Performances were held on Sundays and public holidays, with rest days only on Christmas Day, Easter, and Whit Sunday. A Copenhagen resident such as Kierkegaard could therefore soon build up a rather rich stock of theatrical experiences.<sup>17</sup>

As in the case of the visual arts, theater, too, was in a golden age. Frederikke Bremer, a Swedish novelist who visited Copenhagen in the late 1840s (but was rebuffed by Kierkegaard when she proposed calling on him; see *SKS* 28:467–69, Brev 308–10 / *LD* 286–88, letters 201, 203–4), wrote of Danish theater:

It is the Danes' most favored form of enjoyment. And, in truth, here we find fresh life: there is life in what is put on, life in the acting, life in the audience's participation. It is only small, this theater, where so many great plays have been played and so many artists have trodden the boards in recent times, but how friendly, how lively it is! There is life in these boxes full of people, and the public involuntarily reveals its involvement by a rapid buzz and a sympathetic movement. And there we see the front stalls, where the poets sit, where people can see their favorites, where Thorvaldsen died while listening to a Beethoven symphony and where, each evening still, people whisper to each other "Look! There's Øhlenslæger, Hertz, Hauch, Andersen . . ." etc.

"Not just for pleasure" is written above the entrance to Copenhagen's Temple of Thalia. And those who have seen Øhlenslæger's tragedies, the comedies of Holberg, Hertz, and Overskou, who have seen them played by Nielsen and his wife, Rosenkilde, and his daughter, Phister, the young Wiehe, and the enchanting Mme Heiberg, the pearl of the Danish stage (talents that are rare in any land), those who have seen Bournonville's ballets, consummate works of art of their kind—they will have to acknowledge that the moral spirit of the North has ennobled the magical powers of the stage and that here the theater is indeed "not just for pleasure." We do not merely enjoy ourselves here, we become better while we enjoy ourselves, and the mind is raised to a noble longing for higher, more noble dramas than those of everyday life, to intimations of what human glory is, both in its greatest sufferings as well as in its greatest pleasures.<sup>18</sup>

In a work of exceptional scholarly microscopy, Peter Tudvad has tracked possible references in Kierkegaard's writing to live theater by working through the performance schedules of the Theater Royal for the period of Kierkegaard's possible theatergoing life.<sup>19</sup> There is some uncertainty as to when this began. Children under ten were not allowed in the Danish theater until 1849, and Tudvad consequently guesses that Kierkegaard, having been born in 1813 (and coming from a rather conservative family), is unlikely to have started attending the theater until the late 1820s, which, as Tudvad suggests, makes it just possible for him to have seen Mme Heiberg's reputation-making performance as Juliet in the 1828–29 season (when he would have been fifteen or sixteen years old). The first clear reference to a contemporary performance is from September 1834—among the earliest of all Kierkegaard's journal notes—to a comedy by Scribe, *Fra Diavolo*.

In a small but significant way, Tudvad's work changes or at least shifts our view of Kierkegaard's own creative writing process. To take one example among many: a journal note from November 1834 contains references to yet another play by Scribe,<sup>20</sup> to Goethe's *Egmont*, and to a comedy by Holberg. It might seem natural to assume that these references were based on Kierkegaard's private reading, but since Tudvad shows that these were all performed at the Theater Royal earlier in the year, Kierkegaard is as likely as not drawing on his memories of live theatrical performances. In other words, Kierkegaard is not just sitting at home or in the library reading books: he is out there in the theater and writing not just on what he has read but on what he has seen and heard. Even in Berlin, it is actual performances that are the focus of his interest in theater.<sup>21</sup> And while notes on Hegel's *Aesthetics* and on a German translation of *Antigone* from his first Berlin visit indicate the seeds of the essay on ancient and modern tragedy that would be included in *Either/Or* (SKS 2:137–62 / EO1:137–64), it is probably not coincidental that a much-publicized production of *Antigone*, with music by Mendelssohn and the translation used by Kierkegaard in his notes (SKS 19:286–87, Notesbog 10:2–4 / KJN 3:282–83), was staged at Potsdam in the days after his arrival. As in the case of the visual arts, we therefore need to take the material context of Kierkegaard's relation to literature and the arts rather more seriously than earlier scholarship has done. Further testimony of a rather different kind to the kinship between Kierkegaard and the theater is the fact that he was even represented as a character, the theology student Søren Kirk (later changed to Søren Torp), in the musical comedy *The Neighbors* (*Gjenboerne*) by J. C. Hostrup, first performed in 1844 in Copenhagen's Court Theater and later going on tour to Norway, where, in December 1847, it was greeted with "rapturous applause," one Mr. Smith playing the Kierkegaard character (SKS K27:776–77).

In this bourgeois age that is "post-Romantic" in the specific sense of having been permeated through and through by the Romantics' valorization of art as a, if not *the*, central mode of human beings' self-experience and self-understanding, the world of the arts is not just a matter of intellectual inquiry but is, effectively, the living body of both individual and social self-representation. When Kierkegaard describes his age as "aesthetic," he is not just alluding to the proliferation of dreamy poetic types (such as his own "A") but pointing to the most immediate testimony to how the age and its people feel about themselves or to who and how they experience themselves as being. It is not just about a professed faith in beauty, truth, and goodness (which was often lacking) or the "aesthetic" values of later nineteenth-century aesthetes, but—as idealist theory in fact emphasized—the immediate and spontaneous self-expression of lived life. Or, to look at it from a different theoretical angle, the aesthetic provided a symbolic order or semiosphere that could be collectively and individually appropriated and enacted as showing how life in this emergent modern world felt.



It is for this reason—not in the sense of some carefully calculated program, but as the “reason” in his own intuitive relation to his age—that Kierkegaard’s own writing about literature and the arts engages as often with what posterity has judged to be ephemeral and minor as with the great. Of course, there are discussions of Aristophanes, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Lessing, Mozart, and Goethe as well as of the great figures of Romantic literature. But Kierkegaard is just as ready to write about light comedies by contemporary writers such as Scribe and Vernoy de St. Georges (author of *Ludovic*, in which the character of Captain Scipio appears), popular women’s novels (*Two Ages*), and commonplace book illustrations as he is capable of analyzing and extolling “classic” works. Even the humble art of the street musician was not outside his range of interest (*SKS* 2:39 / *EO* 1:30).<sup>22</sup> And, as his writings about theater show, he was also fascinated by the phenomenon of live performance, which, in an age before film and sound reproduction,<sup>23</sup> was by definition an ephemeral art that could live on only in the memories and memoirs of those who had, as it is said, “been there.”<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard’s reception of literature and art, then, was marked by an openness to a more than usual range of sources, genres, and styles, and he was no less willing to engage what we might regard as low art than the kind of “fine art” that was the subject of, for example, Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics. Like Hegel, however, Kierkegaard seems to have subscribed to an “end of art” thesis, in the sense that, to use Hegel’s words, “the peculiar nature . . . of works of art no longer fills our highest need,”<sup>25</sup> a development indicated by the fact that, as in ancient Athens, art had abandoned the task of representing gods and heroes and turned instead to depictions of everyday social reality. Indeed, this was precisely one of the aims of J. L. Heiberg’s promotion of contemporary musical comedies (or “vaudevilles,” as Heiberg called them) instead of the historical costume dramas favored by the previous Romantic generation.<sup>26</sup> Kierkegaard himself would say that the task of a modern religious writer was to show what the Christian life would look like if lived today, on any weekday, “on Amagertorv [Amager Square]” (*SKS* 12:72 / *PC* 59), a conception that correlates closely with his receptiveness to the whole range of literary and artistic forms in which the ongoing self-interpretation of “the present age” took shape. I have elsewhere written of the carnivalesque aspect of Kierkegaard’s authorship, and that is relevant here too.<sup>27</sup> For what is at issue is precisely, as Kierkegaard complains in *Two Ages*, that the present age lacks any single defining form or great idea and is in the process of disintegrating into an ever-increasing multiplicity of diverse and disconnected forms, ideas, and values.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the only adequate representation of the age will have to be a kind of moving kaleidoscope of works, styles, and genres, which is also to say that there is no single adequate representation of the age and that its manifold self-representations are therefore always on the edge of falling away into incoherence. Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in a distinctively post-Hegelian idiom, saw the emergence of

the modern, nineteenth-century novel as the most faithful means available of representing such an age to itself, precisely because the extreme flexibility of the novel allows it to incorporate a whole range of genres and even carnival elements, as well as to become a forum for the political, sexual, and theological debates in which the nineteenth century struggles to find and articulate its own identity. The novel does not merely represent life but becomes a player in life, attacking, shifting, and remaking opinions and sensibilities.

What Bakhtin sees occurring in the novel applies fairly directly to Kierkegaard. Again, the early reviews of *Either/Or* were alert to just this “engaged” aspect of the book, comparing and contrasting it with works by Young Germany that promoted sexual liberation, political radicalism, and emancipation from established religion. *Either/Or* did not just set up opposing life views in order to adjudicate between them on their philosophical merits; it offered a set of choices about personal, cultural, and religious values that related to the life situation of its likely readers. And, of course, few books have been as genre-busting as this debut work, bested only by the succession of other extraordinary pseudonymous works, journalism, and religious writings that followed.

### Kierkegaard as Writer

I have been considering Kierkegaard’s relation to his own sources and how he absorbed the hugely varied range of cultural forms in which his age not only sought to *express* its identity but, simply, *sought its identity*, preeminently in literature, theater, and music. But I have already made a start on the second task of this essay, namely, to see how what Kierkegaard himself wrote might be regarded as a contribution to the world of literature and the arts.

Here, we immediately note a significant narrowing of the field. It is true that, as a writer, Kierkegaard worked in an exceptionally carnivalesque multiplicity of styles and genres, and I shall be exploring further how this is manifested in the works collected under his name. But where I have been emphasizing how his reception of literature and the arts was not just a matter of reading but of going to the theater and experiencing live drama, opera, music, and ballet, and, perhaps, albeit in a much lesser degree, of looking at paintings and book illustrations, Kierkegaard himself never acted or performed ballet and he did not play the piano or guitar, while his artistic skill seems to have been limited to some rather primitive caricatures in the margins of the journals. Even within literature, his writing falls within the admittedly broad parameters of conventional prose. Appreciative of poetry as he is, he never writes and seems never to have attempted to write poetry, although his writing is often intensely poetic, rising to moments of intense lyrical concentration.<sup>29</sup> As a student he wrote a draft for an Aristophanic spoof on contemporary speculative philosophy, “The Conflict between the

Old and New Soap-Cellar” (SKS 17:280–97, DD:208, n.d. 1837 / KJN 1:272–89), which, despite being treated rather disdainfully by many commentators, does show some potential for comic dramatic writing, although this is never further developed. At various points in the journals he writes short dialogues, including the famous encounter between Socrates and Hegel in the underworld (SKS 27:323, Papir 315:1–3 / JP 3:3306, n.d. 1845). He writes up the public response to his encounter with *The Corsair* in a short dramatic scene (SKS 27:376–77, Papir 347, n.d. 1846),<sup>30</sup> and in a scene running to several pages he lampoons a priest who, despite being employed by a Temperance Society, is partial to a schnapps or two—or, in fact, three or four (SKS 27:465–68, Papir 391, n.d. 1849 / JP 3:3138). However, after “Soap-Cellar” he never attempted a full-blown work in this genre.

Yet if the prose literature that Kierkegaard himself produced represents a certain narrowing in relation to all that fed into his creative process, this still leaves him with an unusually broad range of literary possibilities. Several times I have mentioned his work of literary and dramatic criticism, of which the review articles on Andersen’s novel *Only a Fiddler*, *The First Love*, Mme Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages*, and the eulogies of Mme Heiberg and Herr Phister are the best-known. Although several of these stretch the limits of the genre in terms of content (Heiberg, translator and director of *The First Love*, thought Kierkegaard’s praise was entirely out of proportion) and size (both the Andersen and the Gyllembourg review had been intended as articles, not free-standing books), they are, nevertheless, recognizable for what they are. Similarly, the upbuilding discourses, though generally much longer than the published sermons that were a major part of nineteenth-century religious literature, were accessible to early readers, and no less an authority than Bishop Mynster refused to accept Kierkegaard’s disclaimer that they were *not* sermons.<sup>31</sup> As a thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy, *The Concept of Irony* was constrained by the requirements of academic discourse, even though there are clear signs of how awkward this was for Kierkegaard, as he himself seems to concede in craving the reader’s indulgence in his eulogy of Plato (SKS 1:89 / CI 27–28), while the panel of examiners was not slow to censure his tendency, as the classicist J. N. Madvig put it, to “a self-indulgent search for what is piquant and witty” that can sometimes end up in “simple tastelessness” (SKS K1:134). *The Concept of Anxiety* comes close to the form of an academic treatise, and there is some evidence for the view that Kierkegaard had originally planned to publish it under his own name (SKS K4:323). Here too, however, the work as written, though drawing on contemporary works of psychology, veers away from academic rigor.

Nevertheless, even if several works are closely affiliated with one or another recognizable genre, *Either/Or* and subsequent works proved bewildering to many readers. To be sure, *Either/Or* itself was, as we have seen, perceived as belonging to an influential stream of contemporary literature. It had many

of the features of the contemporary Bildungsroman, or novel of formation,<sup>32</sup> even if it lacked a clear narrative structure and resolution. From Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (generally regarded at the time as the paradigmatic work of the genre) through works like Tieck's *Kater Murr* or Jean Paul's humorous novels, it had become acceptable, if not universal, for novels to incorporate other genres, including criticism, poetry, and, in the case of later versions of *Wilhelm Meister*, scientific treatises. Remoter models from the eighteenth century, notably Swift and Hamann, also provided points of orientation for bemused readers. What was overwhelming in Kierkegaard's case was the sheer multitude of kinds of writing and the scale of it all—"monstrous," as J. L. Heiberg observed of *Either/Or*.<sup>33</sup> Individual elements were familiar enough. Kierkegaard borrowed freely from the repertoire of mysteriously discovered or misappropriated manuscripts (*Either/Or, Stages on Life's Way*), the epistolary novella (*Either/Or*, part 2 of *Repetition*), and the diary ("The Seducer's Diary," *Stages on Life's Way*), and *Either/Or* famously concludes with a sermon.<sup>34</sup> "The Seducer's Diary" and Quidam's Diary do tell a story, and the latter also incorporates an urban "Gothic tale" anticipating Baudelaire's Parisian prose poems. *Philosophical Fragments* has a five-act structure borrowed from the theater, complete with interlude, but while some inspiration from Plato<sup>35</sup> and even Descartes may be discernible, it is "philosophy in a new key" (to borrow Suzanne Langer's phrase)<sup>36</sup> if it is philosophy at all. The same could be said with perhaps even greater force of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. Here, Kierkegaard inserts both reflections on how philosophical writing might benefit from including humorous or other nonscholarly elements, referring to his own teacher Poul Martin Møller's treatise on immortality and providing plentiful illustration as to how this might be done in the *Postscript* itself (which also includes a lengthy survey and discussion of all his own pseudonymous and signed writings from 1843 onward). And how might one even begin to classify *Fear and Trembling*?

Kierkegaard could, it seems, write in many different genres and many different styles, and often did so in the compass of a single book. But this also points to another feature of his literary persona: a penchant for satire and pastiche. I have already referred to the student satire "The Conflict between the Old and New Soap-Cellar," and later work such as *Prefaces* and the incomplete *Writing Sampler* are explicitly parodic, spoofing different aspects of contemporary literary culture. *Either/Or's* aesthete, of course, ended his *Diapsalmata* with the plea that he might always have laughter on his side (SKS 2:52 / EO 1:43), although, apart from the essay on boredom, *Either/Or* as a whole is one of his least funny books. Johannes Climacus is certainly witty and has a surer and lighter touch than "A." Satire—including, as it is wont to include, satirical misrepresentation—is a key weapon in his battle against what he sees as the comically self-forgetful fantasies of speculative thought.<sup>37</sup> So pervasive is this satirical tone that some have seen what others

regard as Kierkegaard's most rigorously Hegelian work, *The Sickness unto Death*, as a spoof.<sup>38</sup> One might say that, irony being irony, this is as things should be, although one might also claim that, on the whole, we know irony when we see it—at least in literature. (Life, being a bit more fast-moving, can make it more difficult to spot: “I found your essay interesting,” says the professor, and the student goes away smiling.)

But Kierkegaard's virtuosity in writing in multiple styles and genres brings with it what for some is the disturbing question of whether or how far we are to take “seriously” any of the pseudonymous works. “Seriousness” is, of course, urged not only by Assessor Vilhelm (Judge William) and Vigilius Haufniensis but also by Kierkegaard himself, as in the discourse “At a Graveside” (*SKS* 5:442–69 / *TDIO* 69–102), often taken as anticipating if not inaugurating the “seriousness” of twentieth-century existential philosophy's pursuit of authenticity.<sup>39</sup> Is Kierkegaard just having fun at our expense, or does he mean it? And if he means it, which bits of it does he mean? All? Much? Some? A little? Would it, for example, be right to partition the works according to whether they are “aesthetic” or “religious,” assigning the aesthetic works to humor and irony and the religious and Christian to seriousness? But that does not seem quite right either, since, even as a Christian writer, Kierkegaard writes as one “without authority” and practices a kind of self-effacing Socratic irony aimed at keeping the reader's own spiritual needs at the center of the process. Even the final attack on the Church, what some might see as the “most direct” piece of communication in Kierkegaard's entire authorship, marks a powerful return to the satirical mode, as well as a condensing of the voluminous prolixity of much earlier work into the “short and sharp” focus of the polemical pamphlet.<sup>40</sup>

I suggest that the first half of this essay has some implications for how we might consider such questions. The exuberant and often excessive carnivalesque play of genres and styles that is constitutive of Kierkegaard's authorship is not just a sign of its author's quirkiness, though it may be that as well. It is also a sign of how he experienced the culture of his present age in its aesthetic self-manifestation, a manifestation that was post-aesthetic in Hegel's sense of having passed from the sphere of the beautiful and ideal into the prose of everyday life. As such it was also a culture in which the clear contours of classical forms were chronically unable to hold the creative and destructive forces of the age in check, with the result that often—and I am continuing to speak of Kierkegaard's experience—it seemed on the edge of falling away from the kind of moral seriousness that could still inform Mme Gyllembourg's *Tales of Everyday Life* into the meaningless “chatter” that he saw as more characteristic of his own generation, a process carefully analyzed in his review of her *Two Ages*. Carnival collapses into chaos, and chaos into formlessness—and formlessness means a kind of proneness to any new form-giving power no matter how arbitrary or violent, a will to power, for example. The aesthete's invocation of a blind vortex as the ground of

cosmogogenesis (*SKS* 2:166 / *EO* 1:168) plays out in the violence of the Seducer and, in Kierkegaard's view, the revolutionary politics of 1848.

*The Point of View* signals Kierkegaard's intention to meet his age on its own ground, "the aesthetic." And this seems broadly to make sense both of the work itself and of how it was perceived by contemporaries, even if there is much to question regarding the "directness" of this work. Yet, parodying his time's wastage of inherited literary forms, Kierkegaard also constantly risks collapsing into "chatter," into endless and pointless verbiage. As is often the case, the satirist and those he satirizes are interdependent, and Kierkegaard sometimes seems too close to what he attacks. This is not only in the sense that his portrayals of the aesthetic life have often been more appealing to many readers than the admonitions of Assessor Vilhelm, but also because, as he often complains of his contemporaries, he too does not always seem to know when to stop.<sup>41</sup> Some readers, at least, have found it so.<sup>42</sup> But then again, what is a serious authorship that does not take any risks? Kierkegaard had to go into the literary equivalent of the "human swarm" if he was to speak to those within it. Loss of form was then the risk he had to take.

### Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Everydayness

These comments invite a concluding reflection on one of the most significant twentieth-century responses to Kierkegaard, namely, the philosophy of existence of Heidegger. For many twentieth-century readers, Heidegger was to be understood as having rendered Kierkegaard's carnivalesque and sometimes chaotic engagement with his age into the somber prose of phenomenological philosophy, using Kierkegaardian insights in order to reopen the ancient metaphysical question as to the meaning of Being. As Heidegger portrays the situation, modern human beings are congenitally incapable of attending to this question, which would require them to cease fleeing from the acknowledgment of their own mortality and anxiously and resolutely to "run toward" death, accepting their ineluctable temporality. There is undoubtedly much Kierkegaard in this, both pseudonymous and "edifying."<sup>43</sup> And precisely by starting with average everydayness rather than (like Plato) with the philosopher or (like Nietzsche) with the artist, Heidegger repeats Kierkegaard's Socratic willingness to plunge into the human swarm. Yet, in the end, Heidegger and Kierkegaard prove to be authors of two very different kinds. Heidegger turns away from the concrete issues of how people are to commit to specific life options in order to meditate on the basic relationship between Being and beings. Kierkegaard, however, no less critical than Heidegger of the inauthenticity of the average everydayness of his own time, accepted that this—"Amager Square"—was where the decision for or against Christ had to be worked through. Consequently, Heidegger writes in the rigorous "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) style of fundamental phenomenology. Kierkegaard's

strategy, I am suggesting, was virtually the opposite. Instead of wresting a contrary interpretation of existence from the chatter of the age, he expends all the lavish wealth of his literary talent on plunging into that same chatter so as to engage those incapable of philosophy, “the common man” whom he claimed as his intended reader. Literature is sometimes said to hold a mirror to its time, but Kierkegaard held a kaleidoscope to a kaleidoscopic time. His gamble was that his efforts would be kept from falling into formlessness by the “great, uplifting, simple, elementary thoughts” that he sought to keep in constant view and that, he hoped, his contemporaries and, no less importantly, posterity<sup>44</sup> would also see—at first in their fragmentary reflection in the literary kaleidoscope, but then more and more clearly in their own continuing rediscovery of “the glory of being human.”<sup>45</sup>

### Notes

1. For discussion of contemporary reviews of *Either/Or*, see George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 7: “The Reception of *Either/Or*,” 137–53.

2. Georg Brandes, *Søren Kierkegaard: En Kritisk Fremstilling i Grundrids* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1877); Ger. translation (“Autorisirte deutsche Ausg.”): *Sören Kierkegaard: Ein literarisches Charakterbild* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1879). For discussion, see Steen Tullberg, “Denmark: The Permanent Reception—150 Years of Reading Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, Tome 1: *Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 8 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2009), 12–17.

3. See George Pattison, “Great Britain: From ‘Prophet of the Now’ to Post-modern Ironist (and After),” in Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s International Reception*, Tome 1, 237–70.

4. See Elisabete de Sousa, “Kierkegaard’s Musical Recollections,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Year Book 2008*, ed. Heiko Schulz, Phillip Schwab, and Karl Verstrynge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 85–108. (On the treatment of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in *Either/Or*, see also the essays by Nils Holger Petersen and Peder Jøthen in this volume.—Ed.)

5. See Leonardo F. Lisi, “Kierkegaard and Modern European Literature” and Hugh Pyper, “Kierkegaard and English Language Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 550–69, 570–90; George Pattison, “Music, Madness and Mephistopheles: Art and Nihilism in Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*,” in *European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Jasper and Colin Crowder (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1990), 1–14.

6. See also in this volume the essay by Marcia C. Robinson, who likens Kierkegaard’s role to that of “a Socratic troubadour,” and the essay by Jamie Lorentzen, who relates Kierkegaard’s fascination with the troubadours to Bob Dylan’s ambition “to serve as a performing artist qua modern troubadour.”—Ed.

7. He also presented Winther with a copy of *Either/Or*.

8. Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 55–86.

9. Thomas Miles, “Horace: The Art of Poetry and the Search for the Good Life,” in *Kierkegaard and the Roman World*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 3 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2009), 39–52.

10. J. L. Heiberg, ed., *Clara Raphael: Tolv Breve* [*Clara Raphael: Twelve Letters*] (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1851). The author, who published the book anonymously, was Mathilde Fibiger (1830–72).

11. In the context of his polemics against Hegelianism, Kierkegaard usually treats Heiberg rather roughly. However, he uses illustrations from Heiberg’s dramatic work on their own merits and as they serve the point he is trying to make.

12. See “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama” in *SKS* 2:137–62 / *EO* 1:137–64; the discussion of Hamlet in *SKS* 6:417–19 / *SLW* 452–54; and “The Great Earthquake” journal entries: *SKS* 27:291–94, *Papir* 305:1–5 / *JP* 5:5427–32. On the debate about these last see George Pattison, “The Year 1838,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 64, nos. 2–4 (2008): 750–53.

13. Though see what is probably a description of the interior of the Church of Our Lady in the discourse “Watch Your Step When You Go to the House of the Lord,” in *SKS* 10:175–77 / *CD* 163–65.

14. André Malraux, *Le Musée Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 10–12.

15. Of course, he was himself living through the golden age of Danish painting, and artists such as C. W. Eckersberg, J. T. Lundbye, and Christian Købke were producing work of international quality, even if their achievement is only relatively recently getting recognition outside Scandinavia. *Either/Or* suggests that he was familiar with the spring exhibition (*SKS* 2:310–13 / *EO* 1:319–23), but it has left little trace in his writing other than as the location for a seductive opportunity. Kierkegaard did, of course, visit Berlin, where he could have seen more than was possible at home, but we know nothing of his visits, if any, to museums there. The art historian Ragni Linnet has written about connections between Kierkegaard and J. T. Lundbye in her essay “Golden Tears: Johan Thomas Lundbye and Søren Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Studies, Monograph Series, vol. 10 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 406–26. (In the present volume, see also Linnet’s essay on Kierkegaard’s approach to pictorial art and visual culture.—Ed.)

16. On this point see the essay by Martijn Boven in this volume.—Ed.

17. See Peter Tudvad, *Kierkegaards København* [Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen] (Copenhagen: Politiken, 2004), 233.

18. Frederikke Bremer, *Liv i Norden* [Life in the North] (Copenhagen: F. H. Eiber, 1849), 18–19, my translation. Bremer’s roll call of great actors significantly overlaps with those discussed (and also praised) by Kierkegaard.

19. Tudvad, *Kierkegaards København*, 238–91.

20. Largely forgotten today, Scribe was at the time Europe’s most successful dramatist. J. L. Heiberg translated many of his plays for the Danish stage as part of his campaign to remodel the Danish theater according to French rather than German models.



21. On the special interest expressed by *Repetition's* Constantin Constantius in the performances he attended of the actor Friedrich Beckmann in Berlin's Königstädter Theater, see the essay by Anne Margrete Fiskvik in this volume.—Ed.

22. See also, in Peder Jothen's essay in the present volume, the quotation from Kierkegaard on the appeal of hand organ music, which represents for him "a kind of poetry on the street corner."—Ed.

23. Apropos of this observation is the suggestion by Ronald M. Green, in his essay in this volume, that if Kierkegaard were living today, "he would be entranced with contemporary cinema."—Ed.

24. It is not accidental that in his memoir *Sixteen Months in the Danish Isles* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), 269, Andrew Hamilton, giving the first known English-language reference to Kierkegaard, says that, despite the difficulty of his books, he aspires to be known as a popular writer. As I argue in *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, it is as important to see him in relation to the world of the feuilletons to identify his connections to formal philosophical aesthetics.

25. G. W. F. Hegel, *Einleitung* [introduction] to *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, in *GWFHW* 10, ed. Heinrich Gustav Hotho, pt. 1 (1835): 14; A 1:10.

26. This aversion was probably a factor in Heiberg's having declined to stage Henrik Ibsen's *Hærmændene paa Helgeland* (1858, *The Warriors at Helgeland*) in 1859.

27. See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 2: "The Carnival Is in Town," 30–57.

28. The complaint is analogous to Nietzsche's lament concerning the lack of greatness in contemporary music and his pointed switch from Wagner to Offenbach. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 439 (aphorisms 833 and 834).

29. As, for example, in his 1849 discourses on the lilies and the birds; see, for example, the evocation of nature's silence in the first of these (SKS 11:18–19 / WA 13) or the call to be joyful in the third (SKS 11:43–44 / WA 39–40).

30. I am aware of no published English translation of this scene.

31. In a treatise on the art of preaching Mynster had argued that the designation "upbuilding discourse" was the most appropriate way of referring to contemporary sermons, which, he thought, needed to be neither evangelizing nor didactic. For discussion, see George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: The Paradox and the "Point of Contact"* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 172–79.

32. Compare Joakim Garff's essay in the present volume, which interprets Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* as a "Christian Bildungsroman."—Ed.

33. J. L. Heiberg, "Litterær Vintersæd," *Intelligensblade* 24 (March 1843): 288.

34. He had also experimented with the epistolary and diary forms in his early journals, especially the Gilleleie Journal and the so-called Faustian letters (SKS 17:7–30, AA:1–12 / *KJN* 1:3–25; SKS 17:198–208, CC:12–24 / *KJN* 1:189–99).

35. Also, of course, the model for the banquet in "In Vino Veritas" in *Stages on Life's Way*.

36. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1941), 3rd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

37. See John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 2000).

38. For a (qualified) Hegelian reading, see Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1997*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn and H. Deuser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 117–43. For the "spooof" hypothesis, see Roger Poole, "'My Wish, My Prayer': Keeping the Pseudonyms Apart," in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series 1*, ed. N. J. Cappelørn and J. Stewart (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 166–68.

39. See, e.g., Charles Guignon, "Heidegger and Kierkegaard on Death," in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. P. Stokes and A. Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 184–203.

40. "Short and Sharp [*Kort og Spidst*]" (rendered by the Hongks as "Brief and to the Point") is in fact the title of one of the articles in *The Moment*, no. 6, in SKS 13:257–59 / MLW 203–5.

41. Although he is capable of extraordinary concision, as, for instance, *Fragments* and the 1849 discourses on *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (SKS 11:7–48 / WA 1–45) demonstrate.

42. Compare the comment by Walter Lowrie on the tedium of translating large swaths of *Stages on Life's Way*. See his "Translator's Introduction" to Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. W. Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 13.

43. On the importance of the edifying literature, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 494 (note to p. 235 of Heidegger's text).

44. On Kierkegaard's writing as an appeal to posterity and beyond posterity toward a universal resurrection, see Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, 221–24.

45. The phrases "great," "uplifting," "simple," "elementary thoughts," and "the glory of being human" are from his 1847 discourses on the lilies and the birds of Matthew 6. See SKS 8:281–96, esp. 286 / UDVS 183–200, esp. 188–89. My English translations here vary slightly from the Hongks'.

