



PROJECT MUSE®

Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts

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

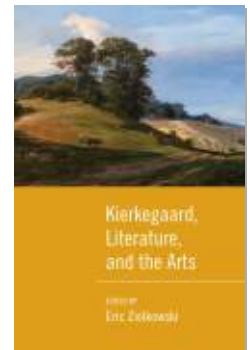
Published by Northwestern University Press

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

Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57275>

“Let No One Invite Me, for I Do Not Dance”

Kierkegaard’s Attitudes toward Dance

Anne Margrete Fiskvik

Søren Kierkegaard was a man concerned with many types of artistic expressions and social practices, dance being one of them. He made references to dance and movement in several of his writings.¹ He was concerned with dance both as an art form and as a social practice, commenting on these in different ways. Kierkegaard and certain pseudonyms of his often use dance as a metaphor or allusion to enrich their philosophical discourses and fine points. They often employ dancing images in a didactic manner. They talk about the *dancer*, the ballroom dancer as well as the ballet dancer. They contrast the female with the male dancer. Kierkegaard refers to the *ballet master* and the *dancing master*, the person who choreographs and designs the ballet. He was also interested in the *expressionistic nature of dance*, to what degree a ballet can render true human emotions. He was preoccupied with what can be expressed in *ballet plots*, and with what *subjects* can be deemed suitable for a ballet.

Even if the references to dance by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms are less extensive than those to other art forms, such as music, he was evidently intrigued by the way dance images activate the imagination and deeper reflection of the reader. The twisted body, the tightrope dancer, the ballet leap—all of these have literal meanings while at the same time evoking images and meanings beyond the actual dance or dancing. They give the reader wonderful images to ponder, and numerous scholars have discussed some of the better known images—for instance, the “twisted dancer.”

This essay does not aim to offer a philosophical interpretation of the dance images and allusions in Kierkegaard’s writings. Rather, I am concerned with the different ways Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms appeal to dance. I aim to contextualize and interpret their references to and comments on dance. I do not attempt to catalogue all the mentions of dance or dancing in Kierkegaard’s writings, but I do try to bring into focus most of these references, both those that are well known and some that are less well known. My perspective is that of the dance scholar, and rather than offering philosophical or religious interpretations, my main aim is to offer the reader some ideas on what could have shaped Kierkegaard’s thoughts and attitudes toward dance.

The dance references in his writings have not, to my knowledge, previously been studied in the broad manner I attempt in this essay. A few dance scholars have been intrigued by the dance references, and I draw upon several of their works, for instance, Nathaniel Kramer's "August Bournonville: Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith and the 'Noble Art of Terpsichore'" and Kimerer LaMothe's "The Poet and the Dancer."²

Kierkegaard often betrays ambivalence in his attitude toward dancing. He admired the art form but considered it limited in its artistic possibilities. This ambivalence, which he expresses rather didactically, will be revealed in different ways in the three main parts of the essay. The first part, on Kierkegaard and dance as an art form, deals with his thoughts on dance as theatrical practice and his relationship to the ballet master August Bournonville. The second part examines his metaphors, and the third, on Kierkegaard and the ballroom dancer, deals with his thoughts on dance as social practice.³

Kierkegaard and Dance as an Art Form

Kierkegaard lived in an era that saw rich developments in several artistic expressions, not least in classical ballet. The Romantic era in ballet began in the early 1830s, somewhat belatedly compared to music and literature but lasting more or less to the end of the century. The Romantic ballet was epitomized by two types of female ballerina, one of them cherished for her light, eerie, and elevated way of moving, and the other appreciated for her sensual, down-to-earth dancing. The role of the male dancer, in contrast, was scaled down in the European ballet and often reduced the male to a supporter and enabler of the ballerina's steps. However, in Denmark, the dancer and ballet master August Bournonville valued the male dancer as equal to the ballerina, and it is to Kierkegaard's relation to this preeminent male Danish dancer of his time that we now shall turn.

Kierkegaard and the "Ballet Poet" Bournonville

In Kierkegaard's home country, Denmark, lived and worked one of the most significant figures of Romantic ballet, August Bournonville (1805–1879). The son of the dancer and ballet master Antoine Bournonville, August was born into a family of dancers. He started his ballet training at an early age, and his extraordinary talent was soon discovered. Bournonville took classes with Vincenzo Galeotti (1773–1813), the Italian ballet master who led and developed the Danish Royal Ballet for many years. He also studied with well-known ballet masters in Paris, such as Auguste Vestris (1760–1842), and quickly developed into a premiere dancer at the Paris Opera. Upon his return to Denmark, he started working at the Royal Danish Ballet and soon became the main ballet choreographer and leader of the ensemble. Except for some

years during which he was expelled from the Royal Danish Theater (in 1841) or working in Stockholm or at the Paris Opera, Bournonville ruled the Royal Danish Ballet with a firm hand from 1830 to 1877.⁴

The effort of Bournonville in building the Danish Royal Ballet was of great importance to the ballet world, and even though his legacy has grown retrospectively, he was already a respected ballet master, choreographer, and dancer around 1840. Bournonville lived and worked at the height of the Romantic era in ballet, but in contrast to many of his contemporary ballet choreographers, he kept up the importance of the male dancer. He cherished the male dancer in Denmark when the male dancer's importance was diminished in the rest of Europe.⁵

Bournonville had been the leader of the Royal Danish Ballet for several years and was a well-known figure in Copenhagen by 1843, the year Kierkegaard published *Either/Or* (on February 20), *Repetition*, and *Fear and Trembling* (both of the latter two on October 16), as well as two sets of *Upbuilding Discourses* (on May 16 and October 16). Kierkegaard and Bournonville were acquaintances but not close friends.⁶ Kierkegaard refers to Bournonville explicitly in a couple of places in his writings as well as indirectly. Bournonville, for his own part, admitted his fascination with Kierkegaard's use of irony retrospectively at a farewell party he held in 1861 on the occasion of his departure to accept a new position in Stockholm. In an unpublished speech, he revealed that the two of them took walks together, contemplating matters such as the concept of irony: “An excellent Danish philosopher has written a lengthy dissertation on the concept of Irony. I admit with modesty that I have not yet read it, since I have only pursued and digested very little of the aforesaid author. On the other hand I enjoyed the great happiness of often walking with him and refreshing myself with his insatiable fount of knowledge and perspicacity.”⁷ Despite Bournonville's claim that he had not read much, if any, of Kierkegaard's work, there is evidence of the contrary: several of Kierkegaard's books were in Bournonville's substantial library, books that are still part of Bournonville's legacy. However, later in life, after Kierkegaard's attack on Bishop Mynster and the Danish state church, Bournonville took a less favorable attitude toward him.⁸ Bournonville was indeed a very well-read man who kept up with the literary trends and discussed these with contemporary writers. Moreover, he saw himself as a “Balletdigter”—a ballet poet.⁹

It is not totally clear during which periods Bournonville and Kierkegaard walked together, but according to the Bournonville expert Knud Arne Jürgensen, the walks would most likely have taken place in the years before and after Bournonville was exiled for half a year in 1841, from March 14, for having offended the Danish king. Bournonville returned in September 1841. On October 25 (two weeks after having broken off his engagement with Regine Olsen), Kierkegaard departed for Berlin, where he remained for four months, returning to Copenhagen on March 6, 1842. On May 8

the following year, he again left Copenhagen, this time for a shorter visit to Berlin. This is noteworthy because, according to Jürgensen, Kierkegaard's walks with Bournonville were over by 1843.¹⁰ Nor is it clear how these walks began, since the two men seem unlikely walking companions. Yet Kierkegaard enjoyed his walking tours along the streets of Copenhagen with many of the city's eminent figures, as Kramer points out.¹¹ Bournonville was at this point one of the highly respected, "eminent" persons in Copenhagen, a man with strong opinions and the courage to speak against the authorities. This might have attracted Kierkegaard to Bournonville, who was clearly drawn to Kierkegaard's existentialist outlook. He points out that his walks with Kierkegaard helped to clarify his own attitudes toward the use of irony: "One thing I did discover, that irony is not identical with ridiculousness, mockery or bitterness, but is on the contrary an important element in our spiritual existence—the fortification with alcohol that takes away the sickly sweetness of wine's grapes, the jet of cold water that dampens a fever, in short the smile through tears that prevents us from becoming lachrymose."¹² Bournonville's plots were not constructed to be ironic, and therefore this quotation is highly relevant, because Kierkegaard would criticize Bournonville for his lack of refined libretti. Bournonville himself seems to have been aware that his outlook on life and art was rather naive compared to Kierkegaard's, and yet he explains and defends his position: "I will not claim that all friends here gathered know me to my inner being, but their acquaintance with me is sufficient to realise that it is more feeling than irony that plays the main rôle in my life. I and my art belong properly to a sentimental time and direction, I have unceasingly lived in a battle with the *external* influence of irony; and I will not deny that it has dominated me so much that I have often felt strange and embarrassed in the middle of its atmosphere of self-parody."¹³

Bournonville shied away from using irony actively in his own work, but through conversations with Kierkegaard he at least felt more at ease with the concept: "Today for the first time I have realised its [irony's] true worth. . . . It is certain that after our standards I possess too little irony, but that supply which I have been able to collect in so many years of this ingredient will now be to my benefit."¹⁴ Also, as Jürgensen points out in his discussion of Bournonville's philosophical outlook, he "could certainly be called an existentialist *ante litteram*. He based his life on artistic ideals, but moved with moral and muscular immediacy both in his art and in many other social contexts outside of the theatre."¹⁵ Thus Bournonville openly revealed that he had clear ideals for his own works and that he went for the more straightforward plots that contextualized his choreography, weaving solos, pas de deux, and corps de ballet sequences naturally into the story of the ballet. He was a prolific choreographer, creating a variety of ballets with stories situated in different countries. He was able to convey great happiness, sorrow, and pain through movement. Moreover, he was deeply religious and often brought up the conflict of good versus evil in his ballets. The plots often have a moral

component to them, and most often the stories end happily: God triumphs over evil, for instance in *Napoli or The Fisherman and His Bride* (*Napoli eller Fiskeren og hans Brud*, 1842), in which the heroine, Teresina, captivated by an evil sea king, regains her memory and sense by touching the cross she wears on a necklace.¹⁶

Despite the admiration in which Bournonville held Kierkegaard, there is also evidence of his criticizing the philosopher. In an entry of December 29, 1854, in his unpublished diary, he wrote of an evening party he attended where the theater director Frederik Ludvig Høedt defended Kierkegaard against Bishop Mynster: “We had a pleasant time, but Høedt displeases me by defending Søren Kjerkegaard’s vile attack on Münster.”¹⁷ Bournonville was thus guided by his deep religious convictions and clearly took a stance against Kierkegaard in the Mynster debate.

Kierkegaard’s Views on Balletic Plots

By 1843, when *Fear and Trembling* was published, Bournonville had created the ballets *Faust*, *La Sylphide*, and *Napoli*, all typical of his choreographic style and conveying clear moral messages.¹⁸ Kierkegaard, although he admired Bournonville as a performer, was critical of his libretti and would mock Bournonville for his simpleminded plots, either openly or in more discreet ways. His manner of expression was also quite didactic. In *Fear and Trembling*, speaking through his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard mentions dance in several places. In his discussion of the rivalry between aesthetics and ethics, he makes a derogatory remark about the limited capacity of ballet subjects when discussing the relationship between Queen Elizabeth I and her lover Essex. Johannes de Silentio finds this overly dramatic story suitable for ballet and ironically writes, “This would be a subject for a poet who knew how to pry secrets out of people; otherwise, it can best be used by a ballet master, with whom the poet frequently confounds himself these days” (*SKS* 4:183 / *FT* 94). Elizabeth’s dilemma and dramatic decisions are not worthy of being elaborated upon by a real poet, but are suitable themes for a ballet master. With this claim Johannes de Silentio is implying that movements and gestures cannot replace real words. He also states that ballet masters mistakenly think of themselves as poets, referring to Bournonville, who called himself a “ballet poet” in several of his writings. He once explained, “After my return to my fatherland (in 1830) I occupied myself almost wholly with my ballet programmes, which concerning literature gave only a grievous scanty yield. For if a ballet poet allows himself to be tempted to give these outlines a touch of explanatory colouring, he risks promising more than he can deliver.”¹⁹ Jürgensen points out that Bournonville by no means was against the writing of extensive scenarios and that he often provided meticulous programs for his ballets.²⁰ Also, it is important to note that Bournonville had secret aspirations to be a poet. Over the years

he wrote a large number of poems and songs, most of which he published anonymously. He collected them in a handwritten volume that he labeled "Poetic attempts."²¹

But to the complicated thinker Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio, Bournonville's plots appeared rather too naive: Kierkegaard himself would ponder questions of moral nuance and deceit over and over again in several volumes, scrutinizing topics from different angles. There were no clear-cut or easy solutions for Kierkegaard.²² Hints of two different literary positions can be seen here as well: Kierkegaard admired the thoughts and ideas of the French dramatist Eugène Scribe, who advocated plots that could be easily told and expressed but who rather superficially described human nature.²³ Bournonville was interested in human nature and took a more personal approach to his characterizations.²⁴

Even if Kierkegaard did not appreciate Bournonville's poetic effort, he clearly admired Bournonville as a performer. He probably saw him dance several times. It is known for a fact that he was present when Bournonville danced the role of Mephistopheles in his *Faust* (1832) when it was restaged in 1842.²⁵ Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis comments positively on Bournonville's fantastic leap in *The Concept of Anxiety* (SKS 4:432 / CA 131). In a journal entry of 1843, Kierkegaard makes direct reference to Bournonville, admiring his diabolical leap in *Faust*: "It's a merit of *Bournonville's* portrayal of Mephistopheles, that leap with which he always appears and jumps into a plastic [*plastisk*, i.e., carefully poised] pose. This leap is a moment that should be noted in understanding the demonic. For the demonic is the *sudden*" (SKS 18:172–73, JJ:104 / KJN 2:160, emphases in original). Bournonville danced the role of Mephistopheles from June 10, 1842, until March 1843, and it is probably his interpretation that Kierkegaard is referring to as being demonic and thus interesting. In fact, the concept of a leap intrigued Kierkegaard, and he returns to it in *Fear and Trembling*, where he uses it metaphorically. He saw the ability to leap well as something agreeable and admirable, and Bournonville was indeed known as a great jumper. In fact his entire ballet technique was built around speed and elevation.²⁶ Kierkegaard appreciated his ability to leap forward into a plastic position. The spring of Bournonville was sudden, and implicitly powerful, and, for Kierkegaard, this feature stands in contrast to another side of the demonic: the boring.

When choreographing *Faust*, Bournonville followed typical French ballet conventions; for example, male dancers often would leap through an open window when making an entrance. Although such leaps were quite common in many ballets of the time, Kramer suggests that Kierkegaard was unaware of this standard practice of leaping onto the stage and that he therefore misinterpreted Bournonville's initial motivation and portrayal of a demonic personality.²⁷ This might be so, but one must not forget that Bournonville was an excellent jumper and widely known for his powerful leaps. His leaps would probably have astonished his audience. Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard,

this particular leap came across as powerful enough that it conjured images of the demonic.²⁸ Bournonville as dancer and performer doubtlessly gained more respect from Kierkegaard than did Bournonville the choreographer. Whereas he found Bournonville’s plot boring and unimaginative, Bournonville’s dancing conjured powerful images to which Kierkegaard’s writings later alluded.

Aside from his admiration for Bournonville the dancer, we are once again reminded that Kierkegaard found Bournonville’s choreographic works, and also ballet in general as an art form, limited in its expressiveness. This is seen in some undated notes of 1844 labeled “Begyret Angest” (Concept of Anxiety). There he discusses the expressive nature of dance even more extensively and elaborates on what can and cannot be expressed in ballet. He writes once more about the development of the demonic, and he refers to what he previously wrote about the development of the demonic either as sudden or as boring, without continuity. Making notes to himself, using keywords rather than complete sentences, he states, “The mimetic is the best expression for the demonic. Bournonville. Without content. (Elverpigen)” (*Pap.* V B 58, my translation). As if to remind himself of his line of thought, Kierkegaard is indicating that he has Bournonville in mind when jotting this down. He again is implying that Bournonville as a dancer can portray the demonic, which is something positive. “Elverpigen” (elf maiden) is most likely another word for one of the characters of the ballet *Undine*, which Bournonville choreographed in 1842.²⁹ Kierkegaard found this five-act ballet, based on a dramatic fairy tale, to be “without content.” Again, we see that he was not happy with this kind of naive and simple plot.

Don Juan as Ballet

Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with the figure of Don Juan as a “protest against the ethical claim of Christianity,” and hence as a “character . . . possible only within Christianity,”³⁰ is well known, and sure enough, he also had ideas about Don Juan in relation to ballet. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym “A” spends some time discussing what can be lost and what can be gained through the use of movement. As he is pondering various plays that tell the story of Don Juan, he points out that as soon as Don Juan is given lines to speak, everything changes in his character and makes him come across as less vague (see *SKS* 2:109 / *EO* 1:106). “A” then surprisingly admits that perhaps the best way of portraying this play is by staging it as a ballet, at least in the final scene. But again he changes his opinion: “That is, the reflection that motivates the lines reflects him out of the vagueness in which he is only musically audible. This being so, it might seem that Don Juan could be interpreted best as ballet. It is indeed well known that he has been interpreted in this way. Yet this interpretation must be commended for having known its powers, and for this reason it has limited itself to the final scene, where the passion in Don Juan would be most readily visible in the pantomimic play

of muscles” (SKS 2:109 / EO 1:106). The previous interpretation that “A” is referring to is probably the version of the play *Don Juan ou Le Festin de Pierre* (*Don Juan, or the Stone Guest’s Banquet*), which had been choreographed in 1761 by the Italian ballet master Gasparo Angiolini (1731–1803) to the music of Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714–1787). Contemporary audiences found Angiolini’s version of this ballet too expressive; they especially considered the scene where Don Juan is tortured on his way to Hades too literal in its expressiveness.³¹ Kierkegaard was likely aware of this old controversy, thus admitting that the very last scene of *Don Juan* could be suitable for dance. He is letting “A” argue didactically about the “pantomimic play of muscles,” and he is willing to admit that certain passages can be revealed through movement but that the real strength of the rendering lies in the music. Kierkegaard could have seen other balletic versions of *Don Juan*, but it is unclear which version “A” is referring to when he states that the true nature of Don Juan’s inner life cannot be sufficiently portrayed in dance. Only the outwardly dramatic can be presented, “whereas the ballet presents almost nothing more than the torments of despair, the expression of which, since it has to be solely in pantomime, he shares with many others who are in despair. What is essential in Don Juan cannot be presented in ballet, and everyone readily feels how ludicrous it would be to watch Don Juan infatuating a girl by means of dance steps and ingenious gesticulations. Don Juan is an inner qualification and thus cannot become visible or appear in bodily configurations and movements or in molded harmony” (SKS 2:109 / EO 1:106).³² “A” obviously feels that the deepest and most profound thoughts of humans cannot be portrayed through bodily movement. Note the didactic manner in which Kierkegaard lets “A” present his argument: his claim that “everyone readily feels” is didactic on the verge of being manipulative. It is a way of making the reader who would think otherwise feel insecure for having thoughts about the ability of the body to portray inner emotions in dance and movement. The didactic writing style is typical of Kierkegaard, and of course especially prominent in *Either/Or*, where the purpose of the book is to let the perspectives of multiple characters be presented and analyzed. However, none of the other characters in *Either/Or* argues against “A,” nor is an alternative view offered on *Don Juan* as ballet. Kierkegaard purposefully is advocating more extreme aesthetic attitudes in order to “awaken” the reader. The general aim of the book, taken as a whole, is to place the reader in a position of having to choose for himself or herself between the “either” and the “or.” Thus the reader is made to contemplate balletic plots and the usefulness of bodily movement and dance as aesthetic expressions.

Kierkegaard and Ballet as Art Form

As we saw, Kierkegaard enjoyed watching dance but discerned no literary skill or qualities in ballet plots. He admired Bournonville as a dancer, but

he and the pseudonymous author of *Either/Or*'s first part are less respectful regarding Bournonville's choreographic ability and the dramatic possibilities of ballet. Interestingly, such opinions seem to be contradicted in other writings of Kierkegaard, where either he or one of his pseudonyms expresses thoughts through dance metaphors. When Johannes de Silentio describes the knight's ability to move and to render emotions through dance in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard seems to have forgotten his “prejudice.” In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio has full faith in the power of bodily movements and dancing. Again Kierkegaard is showing that his interest in dance comes from the multiple meanings the expressive body can be interpreted as bearing. Also, in other places in Kierkegaard's writings where dance and dancing are used metaphorically, he relies on their expressiveness.

Kierkegaard and His Dancing Metaphors

Metaphors of Mortal and Working Life

As I suggested, Kierkegaard sometimes uses images of dancing to explain his thoughts, to help readers understand what he is trying to convey. Perhaps he used such images when other words seemed to fail him, or perhaps dance metaphors expressed his points more precisely. This is curious because he clearly was ambivalent toward the physical art of dancing. But the *image* of dancing was powerful to him. For instance, he appealed to it when describing human loneliness. In his *Philosophical Fragments*, which was probably written between 1842 and 1843 and was published in its complete, current form in 1844, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus goes as far as to liken himself to a dancer, treading lightly in life, but at the same time rejecting the dance itself. Again we see the ambivalence. When pondering his own opinions, Climacus states, “To have an opinion is to me both too much and too little; it presupposes a security and well-being in existence akin to having a wife and children in this mortal life” (*SKS* 4:217 / *PF* 7). Climacus, by choice, is not leading this kind of life. In the mortal, everyday life, he lives alone because a family life is unsuitable to his existence, as he is up and about night and day with no fixed income. He is dedicated to the spiritual life, which must be understood as his inner spiritual world, in which he has trained himself “always to be able to dance lightly in the service of thought, as far as possible to the honor of the god and for my own enjoyment, renouncing domestic bliss and civic esteem” (*SKS* 4:217 / *PF* 7).

When reading this, one detects the underlying loneliness of Climacus. Yes, he is able to let his thoughts dance about without earthly restrictions, but this also means that the ties to earthly life are more fragile. When facing difficult times, Climacus is even free to ponder death. He is worried about dancing in

real life, and in the text dancing is used as a metaphor for getting involved with someone, probably both mentally and physically:

All I have is my life, which I promptly stake every time a difficulty appears. Then it is easy to dance, for the thought of death is a good dancing partner, my dancing partner. Every human being is too heavy for me, and therefore I plead, *per deos obsecro* [I swear by the gods]: Let no one invite me, for I do not dance.

J.C. (SKS 4:217 / PF 8)

This is one of the most beautiful and at the same time ambivalent exclamations about dance in Kierkegaard's writings. "Let no one invite me, for I do not dance": in this sentence are encompassed the loneliness and perhaps also the fear of getting hurt that Kierkegaard himself struggled with in his own life. The metaphor is strikingly effective and powerful, and even more so when considered in connection with his great ambivalence toward dance. On a more speculative note, the quotation could hint at Kierkegaard's own physical body, including his crooked back, which could have made him awkward on the dance floor, making him feel insecure as dancer. Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* also addresses the issue of dancing or not dancing: "Most people live completely absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows; they are benchwarmers who do not take part in the dance" (SKS 4:135 / FT 41). He is clearly using the metaphor of not taking part in the dancing as an example of human beings not really being present in their own lives but instead just going through the motions. This is a concept with great relevance in today's busy society. On a more personal level, as Eric Ziolkowski has suggested,³³ this idea of *not* taking part in the dance could be reflective of Kierkegaard's own experiences, even though he certainly does, in a metaphorical sense, take part in the dance—that is, the dance of the spirit that Johannes de Silentio has in mind. Kierkegaard seemed to have enjoyed participating in ballroom activities, but more as an observer than as participant.

Another of Kierkegaard's more direct dance allusions is inscribed in the margin of the *Works of Love* manuscript. There, he comments on the efforts of human beings and how they are not meant to be seen by others: "In our work, which frequently has been beyond a human being's powers but, God be praised, never without his support, we have striven to comply with the beautiful rule that one never must detect on a dancer that he is panting. We are convinced that, in their judging, people do not follow this rule, because if they do not see him pant or hear him groan they have no idea at all that he is dancing" (*Pap.* VIII² B 73:133, n.d. 1847 / WL, Suppl., 457). Kierkegaard is commenting on the fact that people need to show their efforts in their work in order to be recognized as hardworking. But more beautiful to Kierkegaard is the effort one makes and the hardship one suffers but does not show.

He invokes the balletic ideal that a dancer’s effort should not be heard or detected; rather, the dancer should come across as moving effortlessly and with no audible trace of panting. Indeed, inside the balletic tradition there has developed an ideal of the almost supernatural dancer who breathes and moves with seeming effortless. Always the dancer should conceal all signs of his or her exertion, but in real life, Kierkegaard notes, people still tend to make loud efforts when working. He shows his social concern when he goes on to discuss how, in a small society like Denmark’s, people form groups that exclude human beings who are different in some way. As a matter of fact, throughout the entire passage, Kierkegaard is talking about his work as an author in Denmark, comparing his concealment of his extraordinary efforts as an author to the dancer’s concealment of his or her efforts. He is thus revealing that the ideal and quiet, hardworking man or woman is a tough one (*Pap.* VIII² B 73:134–36, n.d. 1847 / *WL*, Suppl., 457–60). Engaging in a more didactic mode, Kierkegaard uses the quadrille as metaphor for the mastering of basic skills. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio discusses the need of every man and woman to create his or her own life and educational path (*SKS* 4:140 / *FT* 45–46). When pointing out that it is not wise to start with difficult tasks, he suggests that one must first master the basics. To illustrate this point, he makes a reference to learning to dance the quadrille: “But in our age people are less concerned about making pure movements. If someone who wanted to learn to dance were to say: For centuries, one generation after the other has learned the positions, and it is high time that I take advantage of this and promptly begin with the quadrille—people would probably laugh a little at him, but in the world of spirit this is very plausible” (*SKS* 4:140 / *FT* 46). The quadrille (French: *quadrille de contredanses*) is a lively dance for four couples, arranged in the shape of a square, with each couple facing the center of that square.³⁴ It first appeared around 1750, and by 1820 it was danced among the upper classes and the bourgeoisie. The period of its greatest popularity coincided with the later period of Kierkegaard’s life, as it was one of the most popular dance forms around 1840–50. However, the tours of the quadrille could sometimes be quite complicated, and would-be dancers needed to learn and practice them in order not to make a fool of themselves in the ballroom. Thus the message is clear: a person must master the basics before engaging in the more complicated. This is the way it goes with all education. Clearly, Kierkegaard saw the process of learning the basics as crucial for becoming a civilized person. We find him, through Johannes de Silentio, again pursuing his more didactic style: the pseudonym explains that education is the course the individual goes through in order to refine himself, and this is not being helped by being born into the most enlightened age. The dancing metaphor appears to allow Johannes de Silentio a way of delving more deeply into problems at hand and of suggesting that one must learn to master the problems of life step by step.

*The Knight of Faith's Metaphors: The Twisted
Image of the Tightrope Dancer*

Some of Kierkegaard's powerful—and also the best-known and most often discussed—dancing metaphors are conveyed through Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, some of them also revealing ambivalence toward dance. Pondering the dialectics of faith, Johannes de Silentio speaks of movement and dancing metaphorically, pondering how it is possible to jump back and forth in time. He disputes the common supposition that faith has nothing to do with art but that it is “a coarse and boorish piece of work” (SKS 4:131 / FT 36). He sees faith as something that is in constant flux, moving like a tightrope dancer back and forth: “The dialectic of faith is the finest and the most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which I can certainly form a conception, but no more than that. I can make the mighty trampoline leap [*Tramplin-Spring*] whereby I cross over into infinity; my back is like a tightrope dancer's [*en Liniedandsters*], twisted in my childhood, and therefore it is easy for me. One, two, three—I can walk upside down in existence, but I cannot make the next movement, for the marvelous I cannot do—I can only be amazed at it” (SKS 4:131 / FT 36). What a wealth of images is contained in this quote! Johannes de Silentio's self-conception as a tightrope dancer represents an interesting metaphor. Tightrope dancing was a popular form of entertainment during Kierkegaard's lifetime. Thus the description of the agile and traditionally itinerant tightrope dancer would have been suggestive of somebody highly skilled but also evasive.

Dancing on ropes or wires, either slack ones or tight, has long and deep roots in Europe. The practice was associated with numerous itinerant artists who traveled around Europe up through the nineteenth century. These artists specialized in performances that entertained “the people.” According to the dancing master Andrea Gallini, these technically demanding styles were designed to entertain the audience by showing difficult stunts. The dancing was not targeted for the aristocracy. Thus tightrope dancing often carried connotations of popular and even less respectable entertainment.³⁵ Many artists traveled because of the difficulty of obtaining performance privileges in some European countries. The dance historian Marian Hanna Winter, describing the period between 1700 and 1830 in particular, notes that those official theaters that had obtained privileges from the king or state, or from both, were few and highly competitive: “Out on the continent, the theatre companies that enjoyed ‘official patronage’ jealously watched their smaller rivals, even down to the eeriest company of marionettes. The patented or government-sponsored theatres might also be called the ‘over-privileged,’ and all others the ‘under-privileged.’ The former were allocated complete rights for exploitation of certain types of entertainment and prosecuted infringements mercilessly.”³⁶ Traveling artists, according to Winter, would be categorized as underprivileged, because it was difficult, if not impossible, for them to be accepted into the privileged theaters.



Figure 1. Tightrope dancing with balancing prop from Trondheim, 1751. Detail from a poster by *De kinesiske kunstnere* (The Chinese artists), 1751. State Archives of Trondheim: Poster/plakat, Statsarkivet, Magistraten B, bd 3, Offentlige skuespill & forestillinger.

Established European theaters would seldom hire an artist who was not within their closed circuit, and consequently, many ensembles had to move regularly in order to find work. Some probably preferred this, but others likely went in search of a safer or more stable work environment.

My research into these practices has revealed that several artists would have had to apply to local authorities in order to get permission to perform. Typically they would get the permission if they promised to give away to the poor the income from their last performances. Source material also shows that itinerant artists were admired for their skills. They were often highly technically capable, able to twist and turn their bodies, having superb ability to balance themselves on the slack or tight rope. In addition to rope or wire dancing, they typically performed acrobatics.

Tightrope dancers could in principle perform anywhere; they could tie their rope between two trees or poles at a marketplace in a given city and start dancing (see Figure 1). In short, they were not sophisticated ballet dancers but danced more in the comic or grotesque style, using acrobatic tricks alongside dancing steps in order to thrill their audiences.³⁷

Itinerant artists were typically not well received in society. From the perspective of a contemporary dance scholar like me, the earlier quotation of Johannes de Silentio about the tightrope dancer bears associations with an itinerant, restless nature. It hints at a person unable or unwilling to settle into society. By using the metaphor of a tightrope dancer, Kierkegaard's pseudonym is conjuring the image of a person technically capable but whose artistic nature is unsettled. The itinerant nature of the tightrope dancer makes him changeable and adaptable, since he will have to go to a new place when the current performance space has been exhausted. Working with these images, Johannes de Silentio is suggesting that the tightrope dancer can thus easily move into another existence and in a few seconds be able to see the world with new eyes. Still, the dancer is unreliable in his movement. The metaphor makes sense as a referral to something flexible but unstable.

Johannes de Silentio's reference to the dancer's twisted back supports this interpretation: tightrope dancers were very flexible, able to bend their bodies in all kinds of directions. Nordic sources describe what an itinerant performance would have looked like around 1770 and give indications of performances that Kierkegaard might have seen outdoors at marketplaces. The Nordic tightrope dancer Martin Nürenbach, for example, performed at the Humlegården, a park in Stockholm. According to the newspaper *Hvad Nytt, Hvad Nytt*, he did equilibrist tricks and acrobatic stunts while balancing on a narrow steel tightrope.³⁸ Another of Nürenbach's specialties was his dance with a ladder, which stood perpendicular as he walked up it, then he moved or wormed backward, headfirst, through all of its rungs.³⁹ We can imagine the agility and strength needed for Nürenbach to be able to twist his body in such a way.

Johannes de Silentio's words evoke even more images. First, the tightrope dancer's back is twisted. In contrast to the idealized tightrope dancer, Johannes de Silentio sees himself as being unable to make a real movement, for he is unable to make a real decision and can only be stuck in the here and now, roaming about in some kind of mental existence. The genius of the metaphor lies in how it elicits powerful images for the reader, expressing spiritual and religious dimensions that otherwise could not so easily be described.

A little further on in *Fear and Trembling* there is a long passage where Johannes de Silentio again uses dance as a metaphor, this time for infinity. Here, it is not a tightrope dancer but rather a ballet dancer that he refers to: "It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it—but this knight does it" (*SKS* 4:135 / *FT* 41). Once again, Kierkegaard is alluding to the flexibility of dancers that makes it possible for them to move in all directions. But only the knight of faith can make the perfect leap; not even the knights of infinitude are free of wavering when landing: "The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the

upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. It is more or less conspicuous according to their skill, but even the most skillful of these knights cannot hide this wavering” (SKS 4:135–36 / FT 41). Johannes de Silentio is referring to one of the most typical and, as he himself states, difficult tasks of a ballet dancer: to be able to do difficult leaps and to land elegantly and effortlessly. Following the leap into the air, the landing often involves this moment of a dancer’s wavering that causes a slight impression of instability. A ballet dancer, when doing elevated jumps and leaps, typically lands in what is called the fifth position, which helps to secure maximum stability. But not only the landing but also the ability to *continue effortlessly*, not to waver but to go on is the sign of a real professional. As Johannes de Silentio points out, the knight of faith can do this: “But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel” (SKS 4:136 / FT 41). It is a sign of good and stable technique when a dancer is able to land as effortlessly as possible, with a minimum of wavering, and this can be read as a metaphor both for being able to continue in life and not to be rooted in previous ways, and for being able to rethink a situation and change direction.

With metaphors such as these, Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio reveals some knowledge about ballet. Kierkegaard must have observed ballet dancers and recognized the fine-tuning of their bodies into positions in order to describe them so well. Even though in the above quotation he does not give the specific name for the landing position (the fifth position), in other writings he does mention specific ballet steps. For instance, Constantin Constantius in *Repetition* talks about the *entrechat*, a technically difficult jump.

This again suggests that he was well versed in ballet, albeit perhaps no real connoisseur. It could also be that when Johannes de Silentio refers to a ballet master, he has Bournonville in mind. As mentioned earlier, Bournonville was widely known for his elevation as a dancer, as he could execute various leaps and jumps without wavering, and difficult jumps were part of his choreographic style. He would certainly have served as role model for a perfect “leap of faith.”

Metaphors of Bodily Movements, Hardships, and Frustrations

Some interesting allusions to dance in *Repetition* will serve to show Kierkegaard’s ability to communicate the hardships and frustrations of life through dance metaphors. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Constantin Constantius ponders the power of bodily movement, as well as dance itself, as a possible outlet of frustration as well as of happiness: “There probably is no

person who has not gone through a period when no richness of language, no passion of interjection was adequate, since no expression, no gesture sufficed, since nothing satisfied him other than breaking into the strangest leaps and somersaults [*besynderligste Spring og Kolbytter*]” (SKS 4:33 / R 158). Disorderly somersaults and leaps inhibit the body when words fail. But the discipline of dance and of ballet could also be needed: “Perhaps the same individual learned to dance. Perhaps he went frequently to the ballet and admired the art of the dancer. Perhaps there came a time when ballet no longer stirred him, and yet he had moments when he could return to his room and, indulging himself, find indescribably humorous relief in standing on one leg in a picturesque pose or, giving not a damn for the world, settle everything with an *entrechat*” (SKS 4:33–34 / R 158). This passage has many layers of meaning, pertaining both to dancers and to viewers of the dance. The problem discussed in *Repetition* is to what degree repetition is possible or even meaningful. Learning to dance means disciplining oneself and developing one’s technical skills by practicing them over and over again. A human being learns to obey the rules of ballet (society), but nevertheless, after a while an emptiness sets in, and the strong interests the dancer once could express more freely with somersaults and jumps now come under tight control. Anxiety sets in but can be controlled by repeating the same *entrechat* as always. The dullness of the mundane also serves to calm anxiety. The dancing metaphors may also be seen as a form of playing and living on the surface of life, that is, of not being able to root oneself in reality. Constantin Constantius, prior to making that statement quoted above, talks about “a depressed person I once knew [who] went through life as a dancer and deceived everyone, myself included” (SKS 4:17 / R 139). According to Constantius, the person was going through his everyday motions but without really being present. He was repeating himself, suffering from unrequited love.⁴⁰ Dancing here becomes a metaphor for going in circles, not being present in real life, not making an effort to deal with the problem at hand.

Dancing as Metaphor of the Unrepeatable

Toward the end of *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius describes the wonderful movements of the actor Friedrich Beckmann (1803–1866), whom he observed at the Königstädter Theater in Berlin.⁴¹ Constantius even likens Beckmann’s performance to that of an “incomparable dance,” stating, “He has sung his couplet, and now the dance begins.” Again, using dance as a metaphor becomes an interesting way of describing “Mr. B’s” (Beckmann’s) motions and acting, which Constantius thoroughly admires (SKS 4:37–39 / R 163–65). Later, when Constantius revisits the theater, he finds himself deeply disappointed in Beckmann’s performance: “Beckmann could not make me laugh. I endured it for half an hour and then left the theater, thinking: There is no repetition at all” (SKS 4:43 / R 169). Disappointed, he makes yet another

attempt, but this one too is futile: “The next evening I went to the Königsstädter Theater. The only repetition was the impossibility of a repetition. . . . No matter how I turned and shifted, all was futile. The little dancer who last time had enchanted me with her gracefulness, who, so to speak, was on the verge of a leap, had already made the leap” (SKS 4:44 / R 170). The dance he had seen performed by the ballerina earlier could not be repeated satisfactorily; she had already leaped forward. A dancer will not be able to give an identical experience to the viewer. Again we see Kierkegaard’s preoccupation with the leap as a powerful metaphor, this time indicating that once the leap has been performed, it can never be seen the same way again. Thus movements and dance are useful for making Climacus’s points: nothing can ever be repeated.

Metaphors of Love and Loss

Sometimes Kierkegaard speaks with less ambivalence and gives dance more literal meanings. In the “Second Series” of *Works of Love* is a section called “Recollecting One Who Is Dead,” where Kierkegaard is writing about what it is like to mourn somebody who is dead. He points out the pure expressiveness of the human body: “If you could manage to see someone shadowboxing in dead earnest, or if you could prevail upon a dancer to dance solo the dance he customarily dances with another, you would be able to observe his motions best, better than if he were boxing with another actual person or if he were dancing with another actual person” (SKS 9:341 / WL 347). When alone, without his partner, the dancer is more expressive and clear and more easily interpreted and observed. It could also be that the sorrow of having to dance alone sharpens the bodily movements and makes them clearer. Interestingly, in this situation Kierkegaard sees the body as expressive, able to reveal and signify profound loss and grief. It is perhaps expressive because it is genuine. He would probably not think the same expressiveness could be revealed in a ballet plot.

In the section called “Love Abides” (from 1 Cor. 13:13), Kierkegaard is concerned with the strength of love and uses the dancing of two people together as a metaphor of lost love: “Does the dance end because one of the dancers has gone away? In a certain sense. But if the other remains standing in the position that expresses bowing toward the one who is not seen, and if you know nothing about the past, you will say, ‘The dance will surely begin just as soon as the other one, who is awaited, comes’” (SKS 9:305 / WL 307). The beauty and power of this metaphor becomes evident when we try to interpret it, as the words then come across as much more banal than the metaphor itself: when a person has left a relationship, the person remaining stands there, frozen in the moment, unable to continue. Anticipation and longing are reflected in the body language of the person who is left; the person is no longer himself or herself. The person seems to be waiting

for the lost partner to complete the dance. Maybe the quotation also betrays Kierkegaard's own longing "to start a dance"—that is, his longing for a lost partner.

Kierkegaard and His Dancing Metaphors

Kierkegaard skillfully used dance metaphors of many kinds. They engage the reader and evoke vivid images that help to convey his (or his pseudonym's) message. At the same time, the metaphors seem sometimes ambivalent, creating room for different interpretations, which certainly must have been one of the goals of Kierkegaard, who so much loved to ponder the nuances of life. The didactic nature of his writing style also becomes less obvious when he engages in dancing metaphors; instead, he becomes poetic, offering the reader wonderful and beautiful ideas to ponder: he offers suggestions that may lead the reader's mind to wander; he engages his reader in creative dialogue. As we saw, through his and his pseudonyms' use of dance metaphors in both *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, he even hints at his own ambivalence as a dancer in social settings.

Kierkegaard and the Ballroom

The Seductive Nature of Ballroom Dancing

So far, I have discussed Kierkegaard's thoughts on dance as a theatrical art form—that is, on ballet, ballet masters, and ballet plots, as well as his many powerful images of dancers and dancing. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms were also concerned with the social aspects of dance, such as the kind of dancing that takes place in the ballroom. Some of the references are metaphorical; others are more concrete. Most of them are also rather didactic.

The didactic approach is taken, for example, in a comment on the seductive nature of ballroom dancing in the section called "The Seducer's Diary," signed by one "Johannes," in *Either/Or's* first part. There, Johannes the Seducer reveals, "There are certain times when I admittedly would not want to be deprived of a ballroom, deprived of its expensive luxury, its priceless overabundance of youth and beauty, its multiple play of powers, but I do not enjoy it as much as I revel in possibility" (*SKS* 2:320 / *EO* 1:331). The possibilities for social interaction thrill Johannes, as he appreciates the excitement of meeting women and the possibilities of making contact. He is making a social comment: traditionally, the ballroom was one of the few places where men and women could make contact and where those in love could have a few moments together. However, these social interactions were governed by rules of appropriate conduct. The dancing itself was only a part of a package of skills needed to be able to function in middle- and upper-class society.

Being able to perform the dances well or at least satisfactorily was also something required of men and women of the middle and upper classes. Further into the “Diary,” Johannes reveals that even he acquired certain skills when falling in love with a woman: “For the sake of the first girl, I learned to dance; for the sake of the little dancer, I learned to speak French” (*SKS* 2:335/ *EO* 1:346). Apparently, the woman with whom he was in love could dance well, and in order to be with her, he felt the need to achieve some of the same skills. He forgets to tell us to what degree he was successful in this part of the diary. But Johannes begins to reveal a sort of helplessness when dealing with a dancing woman, who is also playing with him. He assumes an even more philosophical and metaphorical tone when describing his longing for his idealized Cordelia. He feels as though he is part of a dance and that she is perhaps playing with him, sometimes acknowledging him and at other times ignoring him: “My relationship to her is like a dance that is supposed to be danced by two people but is danced by only one. That is, I am the other dancer, but invisible. She moves as in a dream, and yet she is dancing with another, and I am that other one who, insofar as I am visibly present, and insofar as I am invisible, is visible” (*SKS* 2:368–69 / *EO* 1:380). If one reads Johannes’s statement as somewhat autobiographical of Kierkegaard, the insecurities of a man who perhaps does not dance well or does not dare to dance, shines through in this passage, as well as the impassiveness he feels when confronted with the beautiful but unattainable Cordelia: “The movements require another. She bows to him; she stretches out her hand to him. She recedes; she approaches again. I take her hand; I complete her thought, which nevertheless is completed within itself. She moves to the melody in her own soul: I am merely the occasion for her moving. I am not erotic; that would only arouse her; I am flexible, supple, impersonal, almost like a mood” (*SKS* 2:369 / *EO* 1:380). Movements are used as metaphors for a relationship. This quotation beautifully describes the dance of love. Cordelia is moving to the melody of her own soul; Johannes is observing her movements, and he does so while standing still, but with a flexible mind, trying to be as objective as possible, alone on the side. This idealization of love, with Kierkegaard as observer of an unobtainable (nonexisting) dream women, can be also be seen in other of Kierkegaard’s writings. As Ziolkowski points out, Kierkegaard felt “an existential, spiritual affinity” with antiheroes such as Cervantes’s Don Quixote: “Like the outspokenly chaste Manchegan knight, he never married, possibly remained a lifelong virgin, and had an unhappy relationship with his own Dulcinea, a young woman he transformed into an unattainable ideal.”⁴²

Unlike the impulsive, activist Don Quixote, however, Kierkegaard seems to have preferred remaining on the side, analyzing the actions of other persons. This can be seen in an interesting dance-related anecdote he relates in a journal entry of 1838, the year after he met Regine Olsen. There he records an encounter he had one morning with a pair of girls who were dancing to the flute music of two boys, and this leads him to identify playfully with the

lovesick knight: “I came close to dancing along with them—so there is still poetry of that sort in the world.—If I encounter more phenomena of this sort I will surely become a D. Quixote who will see such things everywhere” (SKS 18:101, FF:137 / KJN 2:93). Again, Kierkegaard remains the analytical observer, not daring to participate, but with great ability to render the poetic nuances of a dancing body in the ballroom.

The Gentleman as Ballroom Dancer

Kierkegaard had clear opinions on the male dancer in the ballroom. In a passage removed from the final draft of “The Seducer’s Diary,” while admitting that a good dancer has certain advantages, the narrator also points out that the freedom of dance is rather conventional and somewhat limited for men: “The best thing at a dance is all the small advantages the dancers enjoy. The conventional freedoms do not signify much precisely because they are conventional and because a male dancer ordinarily does not have anything special in his favor, and ordinarily it is a very ambiguous compliment to a man when a girl says he is a good dancer” (*Pap.* III B 56:2, n.d. 1841–42 / EO 1, Suppl., 563). Kierkegaard’s didactic approach shines through: he appreciates the freedom in the ballroom, but at the same time he warns that it is an “ambiguous compliment” for a man to be called “a good dancer.” Any reader who might think otherwise is forced to rethink. Kierkegaard’s thoughts on male dancers were probably typical of his time. Both in the theater and in the ballroom the male dancer was second in importance to the women, even though, in Denmark, the male ballet dancer was cultivated and appreciated to a much higher degree than in other places in Europe, thanks to Bournonville.⁴³ To what degree these attitudes toward the professional male ballet dancer are linked to those found in ballroom dancing is harder to decipher. It is clear, however, that above all, a gentleman must not be perceived as a professional: society dictated that a man should dance well, but not too well. This was because of puritanical opposition and the idea that to dance too well suggested the mark of a professional rather than a gentleman. This notion is illustrated by the following quotation of 1881 from an English dancing society: “For my own part, I do not like to see a gentleman dance *too* well: he does not want to be taken for a dancing master. It is enough if he dance *like a gentleman*.”⁴⁴ The dancing masters, who trained bourgeois men and women, advocated the need for such a social accomplishment as dancing, but even they drew a distinction between the professional and the amateur. The dance scholar Theresa Buckland points out that there was a decline in the performance of gentlemanly masculinity during the nineteenth century. This would mean that by the middle of the century, ballroom dancing had become somewhat simplified and less complicated.⁴⁵ Kierkegaard’s thoughts on and behavior in the ballroom could have been colored by similar views about the male dancer in Copenhagen society. The importance

of dancing fluctuated with fashion and politics.⁴⁶ Probably men and male dancing would have been easily influenced by such changes. Dance would have been seen differently in different circles and classes of Danish society, so Kierkegaard’s comments might refer to the attitudes pertaining to his own social class, where the ideals likely would be similar to those outlined in the following observation by Buckland: “The true gentleman, the aristocrat, attired in fashionable yet unostentatious dress, was identifiable by his posture and gait, ideally characterized by quiet elegance and grace. Early in life he had learned how to distinguish his movement range and energy from that of his female partner, and how to treat her publicly in a chivalrous yet unaffected manner.”⁴⁷ Kierkegaard certainly seems to have been occupied with treating female dancing partners with chivalry. One final point to be made on this issue is related to his obsession with *Don Juan*. Kierkegaard undoubtedly read, in German translation, Lord Byron’s oft-quoted description of his hero’s dancing prowess in *Don Juan*:

He danced without theatrical pretence,
Not like a ballet-master in the van
Of his drill’d nymphs, but like a gentleman.⁴⁸

Byron emphasizes that all unnecessary affectations should be left out of the dancing. The quotation above could also have formed some of Kierkegaard’s attitudes toward Bournonville. Too much theatricality would come across as dandy-like and flamboyant, traits that were fairly common in the social ballroom up to the beginning of the nineteenth century but that gradually disappeared: “A man could be graceful, but with minimal efforts being displayed.”⁴⁹ It seems that Kierkegaard adhered to these rules of social conduct.

Kierkegaard as a Social Dancer

Whatever the influence, Kierkegaard was not interested in disobeying the rules of the social ballroom. It is curious that he, who in matters of the intellect would not shy away from voicing very unpopular attitudes and views, had no interest in challenging the social conventions of the ballroom. Perhaps this was because the interaction between men and women was confined to the ballroom, where the social norms were reflected. The rules of etiquette and manners were strict, even if unspoken. To be a sharp thinker and critic made Kierkegaard an intellectual rebel, but his rebelliousness did not extend into the social realm of the ballroom. He thus didactically advises his reader to behave according to the unspoken rules and, above all, not to behave like a professional ballet dancer. A gentleman should dance well, but not too well.

Kierkegaard writes about dance in metaphorical terms and discusses the nature and usefulness of dance more directly. His often dialectical way of

thinking is also evident in his discussion of dance and dancing. Therefore he (or some of his pseudonyms) must frequently, perhaps always, be understood as speaking in an indirect mode when making more concrete references and allusions. This is, however, less true for several of the allusions he made to dance, where he instead creates powerful images for the reader to ponder.

Kierkegaard's thoughts on dance as a social and theatrical practice often contradicted those he revealed when so richly describing the dancer's ability to be expressive in more metaphorical terms. He was ambivalent in his attitude toward dancing. In fact, his remark "Let no one invite me, for I do not dance" is indicative of Kierkegaard's ambivalence: he wants to dance, but cannot or will not let himself be free to do so.

Kierkegaard also displays pure admiration for the creative aspect of dancing, as in *Fear and Trembling*, where Johannes de Silentio admires the dancer for his ability to go places and do things with his body that nobody else can.

Throughout his writing, regardless of whether he or a pseudonym speaks positively or negatively about dance and dancers, Kierkegaard never shows indifference. His use of metaphorically exciting images and his somewhat condescending descriptions of the art of ballet are never boring, and for this reason they can be read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted, again and again. This is part of what makes Kierkegaard timeless and relevant not only for today's dancer and dance scholar. His comments and metaphors on dance and dancers give all readers pause to think and to ponder issues of human life.

Notes

1. There are allusions to dance and dancers in both parts of *Either/Or*, as well as in *Fear and Trembling*, *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concept of Anxiety*, and *Works of Love*.

2. Nathaniel Kramer, "August Bournonville: Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith and the 'Noble Art of Terpsichore,'" in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, Tome 1: *Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 7 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2009), 67–82; Kimerer L. LaMothe, "The Poet and the Dancer: Søren Kierkegaard," in *Between Dancing and Writing: The Practice of Religious Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press 2004), 85–101.

3. Theatrical dance practices include dance primarily seen and performed onstage, and in this essay classical ballet is the dance form discussed. Classical ballet evolved gradually as an art form from the theatrical practices of the Renaissance and Baroque courts in Italy and France. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it had become codified and looked for the most part like the classical ballet of today. Technical brilliance and artistic expression were valued in the dancers. My concern with social dance practice in this essay is confined mainly to ballroom dancing. For more information on how the two dance practices evolved as one and then split apart, see Ingrid Brainard, "Court and Social

Dance before 1800,” in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, 6 vols., ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen (1998; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2:619–23.

4. For an extensive overview of Bournonville’s life, see vol. 1 of Knud Arne Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 2 vols. (London: Dance Books, 1997).

5. Bournonville choreographed ballets in the Romantic realm, such as his version of *La Sylphide* (*The Sylph*), which premiered in 1836. *La Sylphide* was originally choreographed by Filippo Taglioni in 1832 for the Paris Opera Ballet, with the ballerina Marie Taglioni interpreting the role of the Sylph. Among his numerous other well-known works are *Napoli* (1842) and *Et Folkesagn* (1854, *A Folk Tale*).

6. For an informative article on Bournonville and Kierkegaard, see Kramer’s “August Bournonville.”

7. Quoted in Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:66. Bournonville is here referring to Kierkegaard. The original manuscript is among Bournonville’s papers in the collection of handwritten material in Stockholm’s Royal Library, Kongelige Bibliotket, Håndskriftssamlingen (hereafter KBHA), NkS 3285, 4^o. The passage is also quoted in a slightly different English rendering in Bruce H. Kirmmse, ed., *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. B. H. Kirmmse and Virginia Laursen (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 90.

8. Bournonville’s changing views of Kierkegaard are also pointed out by Kramer, “August Bournonville,” 68.

9. Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:41.

10. Knud Arne Jürgensen, email, July 3–4, 2013.

11. Kramer, “August Bournonville,” 68.

12. Quoted in Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:66.

13. Bournonville, quoted in *ibid.*, 1:67.

14. Bournonville, quoted in *ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 1:66.

16. Bournonville’s *La Sylphide*, with its tragic ending, is one of the few exceptions to Bournonville’s otherwise generally happy endings.

17. The quotation is from one of Bournonville’s unpublished diaries in the Copenhagen Royal Library (KBHA NkS 747, 8^o, Dagbøger, bind 13). The passage is quoted in Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 101. There is also correspondence between Bournonville and Hans Christian Andersen about Kierkegaard’s burial, where Andersen defends Kierkegaard. See Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, 136.

18. For instance, the themes of *La Sylphide* are love, faithfulness, and deception, and it carries a clear moral message, typical of both the Romantic spirit and Bournonville’s own standards: You shall not aim for what you cannot have; deception and unfaithfulness in love strips you of all dignity and hope. Bournonville’s version was based on the original choreographed by Filippo Taglioni in 1832, but because Bournonville could not afford to pay for the rights to the music by Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffter, he choreographed and staged his own version, which premiered in 1836, with music by Herman Severin Løvenskiold.

19. Quoted in Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:85. The passage is from an unpublished article by Bournonville dealing with his literary production between 1830 and 1860, written most likely around 1861 for the planned

second volume (1865) of his memoirs: August Bournonville, *Mit theaterliv*, 5 vols. in 2 (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1848–78), later issued in an annotated English translation by Patricia N. McAndrew, *My Theatre Life* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979). These memoirs undoubtedly represent Bournonville's towering achievement as a writer.

20. Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:85.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:41.

22. A most obvious example is *Fear and Trembling*, which, in debating the moral dilemma of Abraham when he was being asked to sacrifice his own son, scrutinizes all its different angles.

23. It could also be that Kierkegaard is referring to the poet and critic Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), Scribe's rival, who wrote ballet plots, including the ultimate Romantic ballet, *Giselle*, which premiered in 1841 in Paris.

24. For a discussion of the place of Scribe and other literary figures at the Royal Danish Opera and Theater, see Erik Aschengreen, Marianne Hallar, and Jørgen Heiner, eds., *Perspektiv på Bournonville* (Copenhagen: Nyt nordisk, 1980), 54–58.

25. Bournonville choreographed *Faust* in 1832, two years after he was appointed principal dancer and artistic director of the Royal Danish Ballet.

26. Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:31–39. See also Allan Fredericia, "Bournonvilles koreografi," in Aschengreen et al., *Perspektiv på Bournonville*, 160–89.

27. Kramer, "August Bournonville," 77. After 1841, Bournonville's choreographic style became more "Danish," thus departing from the French style. See Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 1:81–84.

28. Mephistopheles's entrance, according to Haufniensis, is not just a dramatic moment among others in the ballet but a "very profound thought" (SKS 4:433 / CA 132). As Kramer points out, "Whatever Kierkegaard knew or did not know about ballet and French conventions, its impact on him is apparent" ("August Bournonville," 77).

29. *Undine* premiered in 1842 and was performed for the last time in 1844. It was set to music by Adolph Adam and I. P. E. Hartman. See Jürgensen, *The Bournonville Tradition*, 2:76–77.

30. Gregor Malantschuk, comment in *JP*, vol. 1, p. 526, s.v. "Don Juan." See also Ronald Grimsley, "The Don Juan Theme in Molière and Kierkegaard," *Comparative Literature* 6, no. 4 (1954): 316–34; Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 5, 19, 35, and intermittently thereafter. (In addition, see the essays by Nils Holger Petersen and Peder Jøthen in this volume.—Ed.)

31. Angiolini's *Don Juan* was based on Molière's play of 1665. The first performance of Angiolini's ballet was in Vienna, in 1761, at the Theater am Kärtnertor. The ballet follows the legend of Don Juan and his descent into hell. It was composed according to the new, emerging ideas of the *ballet d'action*, which were advocated by Angiolini as well as by his rival Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810). The ideal of the *ballet d'action* was a ballet that was more believable and natural to the audience. The *ballet d'action* also emphasized more unity of dance, music, scenery, and costume and less use of artificial pantomime. In addition, Angiolini regarded music and dance as two separate components that dancers were required

to unite in their bodies, and he succeeded extraordinarily well in his effort. Gluck’s expressive music was designed to aid in portraying the action. For more information on this groundbreaking ballet, see Charles C Russell, “Libertine Restored: *Don Juan* by Gluck and Angiolini,” *Music & Letters* 65, no. 1 (1984): 17–27.

32. Nonetheless, as quoted in Nils Holger Petersen’s essay in this volume, “A” himself characterizes *Don Juan* as “danc[ing] over the abyss.” See also Petersen’s discussion of “A’s” contention that music is the sole form of art suitable for representing *Don Juan*.—Ed.

33. Personal communication.

34. One pair was called the head couple, the other pairs, the side couples. A dance figure was often performed, first by the head couple, and then repeated by the side couples. See Theresa Jill Buckland, *Society Dancing: Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870–1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10; Mary Clarke, *The History of Dance* (New York: Crown, 1981), 81–88.

35. Giovanni-Andrea Gallini, *A Treatise on the Art of Dancing 1762* (London: R. Dodsley, 1762), 84–86.

36. Marian Hanna Winter, *The Pre-Romantic Ballet* (London: Pitman, 1974), 30.

37. For more information on traveling dancers and tightrope dancers, see Anne Margrete Fiskvik, “Where Highbrow Taste Met Itinerant Dance in Eighteenth-Century Scandinavia: The Dance Entrepreneur Martin Nürenbach,” in *Sjuttonhundrat: Nordic Yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 13 (2016), 83–107. See also Anne Margrete Fiskvik, “Information udi Dands i Christiania 1769–1773,” in *Lidenskap eller levebrød: Utøvende kunst i endring rundt 1800*, ed. Randi Margrete Selvik, Ellen Karoline Gjervan, and Svein Gladshø (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2015), 287–314.

38. [Anon.], “Utdrag af Brev” [Excerpt from Letters], *Hvad Nytt? Hvad Nytt?*, November 6, 1771, [p. 1].

39. Fiskvik, “Highbrow Taste Meets Itinerant Dance,” 10. Ladder tricks were part of the slapstick antics of the *lazzi*, which was derived from the commedia dell’arte and figured prominently in dances belonging to both the comic and grotesque styles (*ibid.*).

40. Continuing this discussion, Climacus explains that he met up with the depressed young man who is hopelessly in love and tried to sort out his love problems (SV¹ 3:180–84 / R 139–42).

41. Kierkegaard spent time in Berlin in 1841 and attended many different performances, but especially took to the Königstädter Theater.

42. Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard*, 131.

43. In classical ballet, the male dancer was discriminated against in France and Italy, where the female dancer, the ballerina, was much idealized. The male dancer was reduced to being a support of the female, somebody who put her on display. The early 1840s were the age of the ballerina, especially on the Continent. Bournonville, however, developed highly technically skilled male ballet dancers.

44. “The Lounger in society” [pseud.], *The Glass of Fashion: A Universal Handbook of Social Etiquette and Home Cultures for Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: John Hogg, 1881), 164, quoted in Buckland, *Society Dancing*, 118. For a thorough discussion of the male dancer in nineteenth-century England, see Buckland’s chapter “Where Are Our Men?,” 118–27.

45. Buckland, *Society Dancing*, 118. By the 1840s, social dancing had become much more pedestrian than at the beginning of the century, when there had been a vogue for introducing balletic steps into, for instance, the quadrilles. For an account of how to dance the ballroom dances of the day, see Buckland, *Society Dancing*, 10–11, 46–49; Henri Cellarius, *The Drawing-Room Dances* (London: E. Churton, 1847).

46. This point is made by Buckland, *Society Dancing*, analyzing the situation in London around 1900, and by Jean-Michel Guilcher, *La contredanse et les renouvellements de la danse française* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), examining the situation in France around 1800.

47. Buckland, *Society Dancing*, 119.

48. George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, canto 14, stanza 38, lines 6–8, in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (1904; London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 825. Kierkegaard owned *Lord Byron's sämtliche Werke: Nach den Anforderungen unserer Zeit neu übersetzt von Mehreren*, 10 vols. (Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1839); ASKB 1868–70.

49. Buckland, *Society Dancing*, 119–21.