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## Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts

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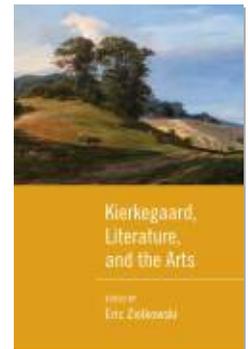
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# Part III



*Visual Arts and Film*



## Painting with Words

### Kierkegaard and the Aesthetics of the Icon

Christopher B. Barnett

Søren Kierkegaard's dubious relation to aesthetics is, in one sense, one of the great ironies of Western intellectual history. After all, Kierkegaard was not only a lover of the arts—famously, he was said to have never missed a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at Copenhagen's Royal Theater<sup>1</sup>—but he is widely held to be the finest prose stylist of the Danish language. As Joakim Garff puts it, "What Danish writer had ever produced anything so fertile and prodigious?"<sup>2</sup> And this is to say nothing of Kierkegaard's remarkable impact on twentieth-century art, from the films of Carl Theodor Dreyer to the music of Samuel Barber and the paintings of Mark Rothko. W. H. Auden, the outstanding English poet, himself an admirer of Kierkegaard, once acclaimed the "brilliantly poetic" nature of Kierkegaard's writings, though he quickly added that Kierkegaard was not so much a poet as a "preacher, an expounder and defender of Christian doctrine and Christian conduct."<sup>3</sup> In this distinction lies much of the controversy regarding Kierkegaard's relation to aesthetics.

Here "aesthetics" is meant in a general sense—namely, as the study of and/or reflection on objects of perception. Indeed, the word "aesthetics" itself comes from the Greek term *aisthanesthai* (to perceive), although, through Plato and others, it has taken on the additional significance of dealing with perceptions that are particularly beautiful or sublime. Kierkegaard adopts both usages. For him, aesthetics concerns what one can see, touch, hear, and so on, just as "the aesthetic" (*det Æsthetiske*) refers to a life oriented to the senses. On the one hand, these sensory perceptions are simply part of the data that make up human life. As Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*, "The esthetic is not evil but the indifferent" (*SKS* 3:165 / *EO* 2:169). On the other hand, such perceptions, especially beautiful and pleasing ones, can wield an influence over one's life, drawing one to this or to that end. It is in this sense that, for Kierkegaard, the aesthetic can be dangerous or beneficial. This tension is reflected in Auden's suggestion that Kierkegaard's poetic sensibilities ultimately yield to a more severe Christian vein. Kierkegaard's religious commitments appear to have effected a rupture from his aesthetic ones—a point of view that finds plenty of corroboration in the secondary literature.

A well-known example of this tendency lies in the work of George Pattison, who traces the rift back to Kierkegaard's 1846 treatise, *A Literary Review*. In that work, Kierkegaard chides "the present age" for its embrace of reflection—its tendency to reject authority and tradition in favor of a disposition critical of everything but the individual's self-interest. Consequently, in Kierkegaard's view, social institutions and relations have been reduced to instruments of utility. What once stirred the passions of people, whether God or country or love, have become objectively meaningless. According to Pattison, this insight compels Kierkegaard to divorce the religious from the aesthetic, even as both emerge as potential escapes from the abyss of modernity. For the redemption of art is nothing more than a whimsy, especially in an epoch of reflection, when the aesthetic preoccupation with *form* has been detached from any meaningful *content*. Thus art, too, has succumbed to the present age: it titillates but does not elevate. As Pattison goes on to explain, "The aesthetic may no longer be regarded as a legitimate stage on the path to a religious awakening. To stay with the aesthetic is to refuse the religious. . . . Although reflection has in one sense destroyed the possibility of great art, an age that fails to choose faith with the decisiveness of inward passion is . . . an 'aesthetic' age. The aesthetic has become the inauthentic."<sup>4</sup> The only hope for the individual, then, is to seek "the religious in the absolute interiority of the self."<sup>5</sup> Even concrete ethical striving in the world has become unrecognizable, *form-less*.

Pattison tenders his reading with somber understanding, adding that Kierkegaard's critique of modern art has served to shape the consciousness of modern art. In fact, as Pattison sees it, the "death of art" has come to give an almost religious mission to the contemporary artist.<sup>6</sup> Other commentators, however, are not as sympathetic with Kierkegaard's vision. Perhaps the sharpest critique of this sort was issued by the eminent Swiss Catholic thinker Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988). Critical of the preoccupation of modern theologians with logic and ethics at the expense of beauty, Balthasar commenced one of the breakthrough theological projects of the twentieth century: his seven-volume work, *The Glory of the Lord (Herrlichkeit)*, (1961–69). Its aim, taken as a whole, is "to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful" and, in turn, to "show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once strongly informed theology." For Balthasar, this is an urgent task. Today, he says, beauty has become "a mere appearance" in a "world of interests," and thus its fate is to be either exploited or forgotten. But beauty's loss is also humanity's. As Balthasar goes on to explain, "In a world without beauty . . . the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil." This diagnosis bears a theological prescription—namely, a return to the *form* of divine revelation. For it is only through form that beauty shines, and "the ray of the Unconditional breaks

through, casting a person down to adoration and transforming him into a believer and a follower.”<sup>7</sup>

With this concern established, Balthasar turns to a genealogical account of how beauty was torn from the fabric of Western society. It is, for him, a theological story, which has its origins in the Protestant Reformation in general and in Martin Luther’s teaching in particular. For Balthasar, Luther’s insistence on “God’s absolute veiledness”—an emphasis derived from his distaste for Neo-Platonic and Thomist versions of the *analogia entis*—results in a rejection of “every form which man tries to impose on revelation in order to achieve an overview that makes comprehension possible.”<sup>8</sup> One can no longer look at a created form—say, a sunset or a sleeping child—and ascertain a likeness to the divine. In this way, Luther sunders nature and grace and, with it, the aesthetic and the religious.

It is at this point that Balthasar begins to attend to Kierkegaard, who, in his view, reaps what Luther had sown several centuries before. By the nineteenth century, art had been all but totally uncoupled from its relationship with theology, freeing the Romantics to deem aesthetics the “supreme value of any worldview.” From there it was but a short step to the aesthetic nihilism of Nietzsche—a development that, according to Balthasar, Kierkegaard foresaw and opposed. Realizing that modern aesthetics was “frivolous, merely curious and self-indulgent,” Kierkegaard fired back with an emphasis on “inwardness and religious subjectivity.” But this response lacked comprehensiveness, and it led Kierkegaard to deepen—rather than to overcome—the chasm between aesthetics and religion. According to Balthasar, “Kierkegaard can no longer achieve a meeting of religion and aesthetics. He is impelled to use the concept of ‘the aesthetic’ to stake out and define a basic attitude which, for the Christian, is unacceptable . . . thereby eradicating from theology all traces of an aesthetic attitude. . . . This enthusiastic disjunction robs man, as it were from within, of all joy in the aesthetic.” Thus Kierkegaard stands as both an accomplice to and a victim of Luther’s theology. Even worse, the Dane’s influence on twentieth-century ideas worked to popularize Lutheran thinking. “The Kierkegaard revival,” as Balthasar puts it, “in various ways had an anti-aesthetic effect on theology.”<sup>9</sup>

In light of Pattison’s and Balthasar’s analyses, it would seem unlikely that a positive appraisal of aesthetics can be developed from Kierkegaard’s oeuvre. The opposition that he ostensibly establishes between the aesthetic and the religious, not to mention the fact that he himself never penned a proper treatise on the subject, appears to quell any such enterprise. In this essay, however, I will argue to the contrary. Specifically, I will show that an “aesthetics of the icon” is implicit in Kierkegaard’s own copious employment of aesthetic imagery. Rather than rupturing the two spheres, he has a dialectical view of the matter: aesthetic imagery can function either in the manner of icons or in that of idols.

I will establish this point in three ways. First, I will explore the concept of “image” or “picture” (*Billede*) in Kierkegaard’s authorship. As will be seen,

Kierkegaard uses this term in a variety of contexts, imbuing it with both negative and positive significance. Next I will argue that this dialectical usage of *Billede* informs his orientation toward the aesthetic in general. An aesthetic image either can draw one into its own ambit, or it can deflect one to something higher—indeed, to godliness. The upshot of this dialectic is a potential integration of the aesthetic and the religious in Kierkegaard's thinking. For inasmuch as the aesthetic brings one to seek the religious in one's concrete existence, Kierkegaard not only applauds the aesthetic but *employs* it. Finally, I will attempt to illustrate Kierkegaard's understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and religion by way of the thought of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. In particular, I will point out that Marion's distinction between the idol and the icon—whereby the former aims to absorb the gaze of the observer, the latter to redirect it—can shed light on the multitude of “pictures” populating Kierkegaard's writings. This last section is not meant to serve as a comprehensive explication of how Kierkegaard and Marion stand in relation to one another; rather, it is an attempt to show, however provisionally, that Kierkegaard's approach to aesthetics bears a resemblance to that of other prominent thinkers—in this case, Marion.

To be sure, as Marion has forcefully argued, human beings are confronted by idols in both image and idea. Yet, with characters such as the woman who was a sinner (*Synderinden*) in Luke 7:37–50, Kierkegaard also fashions *icons* of faith. In this way, and with a measure of irony, he actually fulfills Balthasar's demand for attention to the form of Christian existence.

### The Concept of *Billede* in Kierkegaard's Authorship

The term *Billede* occurs with regularity in Kierkegaard's authorship. In one form or another, it appears more than three hundred times, published as well as unpublished. Moreover, its usage spans his corpus, turning up as early as 1838 in *From the Papers of One Still Living* and as late as 1855 in articles in *Fædrelandet*. An exhaustive analysis of *Billede*, then, is neither possible nor desirable here. Instead, I will examine a few representative instances of the term, showing how Kierkegaard employs it in a variety of contexts and senses.

An early and striking example of Kierkegaard's use of *Billede* occurs in the first part of *Either/Or*, in its final section, “The Seducer's Diary.” The story's antihero, the aptly named Johannes the Seducer, has followed his *objet d'amour* into a Copenhagen shop. Her name is Cordelia, a mere girl at seventeen years of age. Johannes watches as she makes her way through the store, fondling the items for sale with blissful caprice. In order to remain unnoticed, he stands across the room, eyeing Cordelia in a large mirror mounted on a wall. The mirror, he notes, is at once his rival and collaborator. Its seizure of her image is akin to contemplation, to devotion. However, it cannot keep her

image all to itself; rather, it must deliver it to others, who are not so unfortunately constituted: “Unhappy mirror, which assuredly can grasp her image [*Billede*] but not her; unhappy mirror, which cannot secretly hide her image in itself, hide it from the whole world, but can only disclose it to others as it now does to me. What torture if a human being were fashioned that way” (SKS 2:305 / EO 1:315). Indeed, Johannes is not fashioned that way. He compares Cordelia’s figure to the voluptuousness of a piece of fruit. He can, he says, *feel* her with his eyes. And, accordingly, he aims to consume her. As he puts it, “Everything will be relished in slow mouthfuls; she is picked out, she will be gathered” (SKS 2:306 / EO 1:317, my translation).

It is noteworthy that Johannes, the aesthete, interacts only with an *image* of Cordelia. Kierkegaard makes this point especially clear by using the mirror as a mediator between the two characters. He relates to her not as a three-dimensional human being but rather as a two-dimensional reflection. And this reflection, as it were, sucks him in. It consumes him as much as he wants to consume it—a detail that hints at why Pattison calls Johannes a “pitiabile creature” despite his blatant exploitation of others. For “he is incapable of a real meeting, a real encounter with another person, incapable of dealing with a situation of mutual responsibility.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Johannes is an antiquated, but no less authentic, version of a pornography addict. For him, image and reality have been confused; more precisely, the aesthetic as such has become his life. Even when he acts within the continuum of the real world, he remains imprisoned in his own world of fantasies, for only fantasies are capable of arousing and gratifying him (SKS 2:296 / EO 1:306). Pattison sums up Kierkegaard’s point nicely: “What he is showing is what happens when one tries to base life on an ‘image.’”<sup>11</sup>

The Seducer’s aesthetic attitude terminates in sexual abuse, but elsewhere Kierkegaard points out that the lure of the image can corrupt in different ways. Insofar as it effects a break with the real world, aestheticism is like a mold that spoils whatever it touches, be it sex, politics, or religion. Kierkegaard highlights this point in his 1850 work, *Practice in Christianity*, particularly in the sixth exposition of the section entitled “From on High He Will Draw All to Himself.” There Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus explores the ambiguity of “observing” an object, as when “one shows a painting to a person and asks him to observe [*betragte*] it” (SKS 12:227 / PC 233). On the one hand, he notes, the observer must come close to the object of observation so as to get a better look at it. On the other hand, the observer must also remain “infinitely distant” from it since “by observing I go into the object (I become objective) but I leave myself or go away from myself (I cease to be subjective)” (SKS 12:227–28 / PC 233–34). For Anti-Climacus, this dialectic captures precisely what is wrong with Christendom in the present age. The preacher stands in the pulpit and makes “observations”—a rather subtle reference to Bishop Mynster’s book, *Observations on the Doctrines of the Christian Faith* (*Betragtninger over de christelige Troeslærdomme*,

1833)<sup>12</sup>—but neglects to emphasize that “it is Christian truth that is observing me, whether I am doing what it says I should do” (*SKS* 12:228 / *PC* 234).

This is also, Anti-Climacus says, the danger with Christian art. Although he admits that he cannot “pass judgment” on all artists, he gives two main reasons why he could never paint “the image” (*Billedet*)<sup>13</sup> of Jesus Christ (*SKS* 12:246–47 / *PC* 254–55). First, in order to paint Christ’s image, he would have to secure a certain amount of “leisure” (*Ro*; *SKS* 12:246 / *PC* 255, my translation), which would allow him to shirk what Christ asks of his day-to-day life so that, instead, he could paint a picture. Second, he worries that the finished product—the painting of Christ as such—would distort the meaning of the religious life. For in the painting “the artist admired himself, and everybody admired the artist” (*SKS* 12:247 / *PC* 255). In this scenario, the person reflected in the image has been forgotten, eclipsed by the image itself. Anti-Climacus explains, “The beholder looked at the picture [*Billedet*] in the role of an art expert: whether it is a success, whether it is a masterpiece, whether the play of colors is right, and the shadows, whether blood looks like that, whether the suffering expression is artistically true—but the invitation to imitation he did not find” (*SKS* 12:247–48 / *PC* 255–56). Here Anti-Climacus reiterates the trouble with Johannes the Seducer, albeit in a Christian context. The person who views Christ’s image as an end in itself, who allows the *picture* to occupy him or her more than the real thing, has abstracted the aesthetic from the religious and, in turn, transformed it into an idol.

Significantly, this critique is not limited to artists or to the bourgeois aesthetes of Christendom. In an 1850 journal entry, Kierkegaard chides the Moravian Brethren—a major Pietist group, with whom he had both familial ties and theological affinities<sup>14</sup>—for “gazing at Christ’s suffering” rather than accentuating the “imitation” of Christ (*SKS* 23:438, NB20:78, n.d. 1850 / *JP* 2:1874, my translation). Thus he suggests that it is not enough to celebrate the Passion of Christ with liturgical and artistic pieces—a customary and, at times, extravagant feature of Moravian piety, perhaps best captured by *Christ Scourged* (1758),<sup>15</sup> a masterpiece of the great Moravian painter Johann Valentin Haidt (1700–1780). Instead, the religious in general, and Christianity in particular, are to be distinguished by their concrete realization in one’s own life. For Kierkegaard, this is the last word, irrespective of where one falls on the ecclesial or theological spectrum. To put it in Anti-Climacus’s terms, art may produce people who *admire* Christianity, but admiration is beside the point: “Only the imitator is the true Christian” (*SKS* 12:246, 248 / *PC* 254, 256).

It is clear, then, that Kierkegaard’s writings treat *Billede* as a dangerous concept. Enticed to gaze at an image, one can, almost like Narcissus, fall in love with what is not real and die, in spirit if not in body. But elsewhere Kierkegaard takes a different tack. Particularly in his upbuilding discourses, he is inclined to describe certain biblical heroes as “images.” He does not just *call* them images; he uses his pen to sketch them in rich, pictorial language.

A good early example of this tendency turns up in “Patience in Expectancy,” the second address from *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1844). There, Kierkegaard discusses Anna, the aged prophetess who witnessed the presentation of the infant Jesus to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36–38). What strikes Kierkegaard about Anna is not so much her presence at this momentous event as her many years as a widow, during which she apparently remained devoted both to her husband and to God. As he envisions it, where another might have sought solace in “multifarious expectancies” (SKS 5:212 / EUD 211), Anna has passed her long life in quiet fortitude, faithful to her husband’s memory and hopeful that God will reunite them—and all things—in eternity. Kierkegaard continues, “My listener, let your thoughts dwell on this venerable woman, [who] . . . stands as the eternal’s young fiancée. This tranquillity in her eyes that nevertheless is expectant, this gentleness that is reconciled to life and nevertheless is expectant . . . beyond flowering nevertheless still vigorous, forsaken nevertheless not withered, childless nevertheless not barren, bent with years and stooped nevertheless not broken—a widow, nevertheless betrothed, ‘she is in silence’ with her expectancy” (SKS 5:212 / EUD 211–12). Here he breaks off, adding that this “picture” (*Billede*) of Anna is “beautiful,” so much so that “one could sit and grow old contemplating [it], powerless to tear oneself away from it” (SKS 5:212 / EUD 212). It is, in fact, “the object of contemplation [*Betragtningens Gjenstand*]” (SKS 5:213 / EUD 212) for those who rightly understand that life is replete with peril and disappointment but not bereft of hope. In fact, the *Billede* of Anna is more than a picture of a human being; it is a reflection of the eternal. As Kierkegaard explains, “The object of expectancy, the more glorious and precious it is, form[s] the expectant person in its own likeness, because a person resembles what he loves with his whole soul” (SKS 5:218 / EUD 219).

With his evocative prose, not to mention his mystically tinged language of “contemplation,” Kierkegaard effectively treats Anna as an icon—that is to say, as an image of the sacred. Moreover, he invites his “listener” to do the same, to see in his rendering of Anna a picture of patient expectancy. But this *Billede* is not to be an end in itself. The one who properly contemplates it does so in order to reproduce Anna’s virtue in his or her own life. After all, this is an *upbuilding* discourse. And it is Kierkegaard’s painting of Anna that occasions the upbuilding.

Kierkegaard comes back to these themes—in even more pronounced fashion—in his upbuilding discourses on the woman who was a sinner. These writings draw on the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which tells of a woman who tearfully anoints Jesus’s feet despite opposition from the Pharisees. In turn, Jesus praises the woman’s love and declares her sins, “which were many” (Luke 7:47), forgiven. Kierkegaard clearly cherished this biblical story. Not only do his discourses from 1849 and 1850 return to it often, but it also appears early in his authorship, in “Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins” (1843). What drew him to the text was its compressed treatment of several

Christian themes, from the mercy of Christ to the hostility of the world. Yet, more than anything else, the figure of the sinful woman herself moved him: “She has forgotten speech and language and the restlessness of thoughts, has forgotten what is even greater restlessness, this self, has forgotten herself—she, the lost woman, who is now lost in her Savior, who, lost in him, rests at his feet—like a picture [*Billede*]. It is almost as if the Savior himself momentarily looked at her and the situation that way, as if she were not an actual person but a picture” (SKS 11:277 / WA 141). What Kierkegaard sees in this moment is an image of the eternal in history. As he clarifies in an 1850 journal entry, the sinful woman appears *in effigie*—note that his Latin here means “in the form of an image”—precisely because she is “the present one [*den Nærværende*]” (SKS 24:74, NB21:123, n.d. 1850, my translation; compare KJN 8:70), wholly open to God. She is more than a human being precisely because, in that moment, she is truly a human being. “She *is* the symbol,” stresses Kierkegaard, “like a picture [*Billede*]” (SKS 11:277 / WA 141).

And yet, as with Anna, Kierkegaard obviates any attempt merely to rest one’s eyes on the image of the sinful woman. As he writes in *An Upbuilding Discourse* (1850), she is best seen “as a prototype of piety,” as a teacher of “godliness” (SKS 12:263 / WA 149). Here the term “prototype” does a great deal of work for him: in Danish it is *Forbillede*, literally “an image that goes in front.” Her image, then, is a kind of “motion picture.” It invites not observation but *imitation*, calling the observer to strip himself or herself of worldly attachments in order to stand naked before God. The devotion of the sinful woman, manifested in the form of her encounter with Christ, is to be repeated in the lives of others.

For Kierkegaard, Christian faith has a kind of form. It does not issue in just any appearance but, rather, has certain contours and features. That is not to say, of course, that it is reducible to a particular manner of dress or single way of living. Nor is it to forget that even an ideal form, such as Christ’s, can be approached in the wrong fashion. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard insists that the image of *worship* signifies the content of faith, including, paradoxically, the very object of faith. He writes, “In truth, to be able to worship is what makes the [human being’s] invisible glory superior to the rest of creation. The pagan was not aware of God and therefore sought likeness in ruling. But the resemblance is not like that. . . . The human being and God do not look like each other directly, but inversely; only when God has infinitely become the eternal and omnipresent object of worship and the human being always the worshiper, only then do they look like each other” (SKS 8:290 / UDVS 193, my translation). To see a human being worship God is to see a reflection of God himself. This is Kierkegaard’s reformulation of the ancient doctrine of *analogia entis*, which, among other things, states that human beings—as creatures—stand in a proportional relationship with their creator. They convey the divine being, but, following the Fourth Lateran Council, this similarity is nonetheless marked by an infinite dissimilarity. One of the

outcomes of this teaching is just what we have seen in Kierkegaard's treatment of *Billede*: in the images of Anna and the sinful woman, it is possible, indirectly but truly, to perceive the divine. The aesthetic and the religious are not necessarily opposed.

### Kierkegaard and the Dialectic between the Aesthetic and the Religious

Kierkegaardian scholarship is known for its diversity or, as some might put it, fragmentation. A quick scroll through a bibliography—or even an online bookstore—reveals as much. There are books on Kierkegaard the individualist and on Kierkegaard the social commentator, on Kierkegaard the postmodern deconstructionist and on Kierkegaard the guardian of Christian orthodoxy, just to mention a couple of fault lines. Yet, despite this interpretive range, one point seems to have achieved a wide consensus—namely, that Kierkegaard was a master *dialectician*. This, after all, was how Kierkegaard saw himself. In a lengthy 1850 journal passage, after asserting that he is neither a religious zealot nor “only a poet,” Kierkegaard underlines the twin pillars of his literary career: “What, then—in addition to the main thing, that I have been helped by Governance—has helped me? The fact that I am a dialectician” (*SKS* 23:33, NB15:46, n.d. 1850 / *KJN* 7:31).

With this in mind, it is surprising that a number of commentators have neglected to see this dialectical approach as operative in Kierkegaard's analysis of the aesthetic and the religious. Consider Balthasar once again. He insists that Kierkegaard's thought inexorably leads to a chasm between beauty and faith, between art and religion. This is especially a critique of Kierkegaard's later authorship, with its increasingly strident calls for Christian obedience and suffering. But Balthasar omits examples that run counter to his thesis. There is no mention, say, of Kierkegaard's treatment of the woman who was a sinner, much less a discussion of his nuanced recognition of a “social role for art in the criticism of modern culture.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, Kierkegaard's warnings about the misuse of the aesthetic are transformed into categorical rejections of art and of beauty. The dialectical tension is cut, replaced by the resounding thud of his conception of the religious.

To be sure, as the previous analysis of *Billede* has made clear, Kierkegaard's approach to the aesthetic is hardly so straightforward. For one thing, there is little if any cause for thinking that Kierkegaard believes the aesthetic can somehow be expunged from human existence. As C. Stephen Evans notes, “it is a universal dimension of human life.”<sup>17</sup> The implication here is that Kierkegaard's well-known existential “stages”—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—are not mere steps on a ladder, arranged in such a way that to reach the ethical is to abandon the aesthetic and so on. Rather, these stages are permanent domains within the self, which, like a Venn diagram,

overlap one another at certain key junctures. To quote Evans again, “The ethical must in some way be preserved within the religious sphere, even if it is transformed as well, just as the aesthetic must be preserved within the ethical and religious spheres.”<sup>18</sup>

This perichoresis of the existential spheres follows from the analysis of the self in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous treatise *The Sickness unto Death* (1849). There the self is understood as a “synthesis” (*SKS* 11:129 / *SUD* 13) of a series of contrary elements: the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, necessity and freedom. As such, the self is not the bare fact that these contrasting elements are in a dialectical relationship; instead, it is “the positive third” (*SKS* 11:129 / *SUD* 13) that is capable of interacting with its constitutive attributes. In the words of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus, the self is “the relation that relates itself to itself” (*SKS* 11:129 / *SUD* 13).

Much could be (and has been) made of this definition. With regard to the present discussion, the decisive point has to do with Anti-Climacus’s insistence that the self’s goal is not to give priority to one of its features over against the others—for that would be a “misrelation of despair” (*SKS* 11:130 / *SUD* 14)—but, rather, to will to be what it is. For example, in his analysis of despair as defined by finitude and infinitude, Anti-Climacus points out that the imaginative faculty is the medium by which persons feel, know, and will. It presents to the self its own possibilities. This is, as far as it goes, good news, because the self is free precisely to the extent that it can envision possibilities, for example, the possibility of seeking the good. But the imagination can become unhinged, leading the self into a kind of “fantasy world,” wherein it prefers to associate with potentiality rather than actuality. This is the despair of infinitude. Like Johannes the Seducer, such a self is aroused by abstract images but cannot bear any *real* contact with the world. At the same time, Anti-Climacus also describes “finitude’s despair,” which is marked by an inability to imagine possibilities beyond everyday life. Here the self fails to envision its unique potential; it becomes a “number instead of a self” (*SKS* 11:149 / *SUD* 33). The task, then, is to avoid each of these extremes. The imagination, with its distinctive ability to create and to appreciate images and, in turn, to shape the potential of the self, is an essential component of human life. But it must neither dominate nor retreat. As Anti-Climacus explains, “To become oneself is to become concrete. But to become concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis” (*SKS* 11:146 / *SUD* 30).

This point sheds light on the status of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard’s thought. As a dialectician, he does not posit a stark choice between art and religion, imagination and reality, the infinite and the finite. In other words, the issue is not *whether* the aesthetic has a role in human life and in the development of the self. It is *how* one relates to the aesthetic that is decisive.

This conclusion again calls to mind the earlier discussion of *Billed* in Kierkegaard’s authorship. As was noted, Kierkegaard cautions against the

lure of the image, which can draw the self out of the real world and into its own ambit. This type of idolatry—a word that literally means “slavery to an image”—is problematic no matter one’s station in life, be it that of a romantic suitor or that of a Christian disciple. On the other hand, Kierkegaard both encourages and exemplifies the use of images as a means of spurring one to existential authenticity. Here the image does not absorb one’s attention but, rather, redirects it, providing the observer with an ideal that is met only through concrete appropriation. Such is the ideal of *faith*, embodied in Kierkegaard’s pictures of Anna and the sinful woman, which Anti-Climacus defines as the opposite of despair (*SKS* 11:196 / *SUD* 82).

Thus Kierkegaard leaves the door open for the integration of the aesthetic and the religious and makes it a key aspect of his upbuilding literature. For him, the life of faith is beautiful, and its beauty can lead one to God. This is why, as Sylvia Walsh points out, he frequently “declares in the later journals that he is essentially a poet, and in several entries he describes himself more specifically as a ‘poet of the religious’ and even more narrowly as a ‘Christian poet and thinker.’”<sup>19</sup> As such, his role might be compared to that of any religious artist. For example, the business of the painter or, in traditional terminology, “writer” of Christian icons is neither to issue dogmatic proclamations nor to compose systematic treatises on theology. On the contrary, his or her artwork is intended to orient the observer toward holiness, to establish contact between the observer and sacred events and/or lives. The iconographer, then, may draw on the doctrinal tradition—to be sure, it is doctrine, and not the writer per se, that determines the existential ideals—but his or her goal is fundamentally existential. Likewise, Kierkegaard understood his artistic task as creating a “passionate impression of expressing the ideal existentially,” so that a “pathos for the pathos-filled life” is nurtured (*SKS* 22:329, 331, NB13:88, n.d. 1849 / *KJN* 6:333). An 1850 journal entry puts it in more direct terms:

But now a poetic form will be needed in presenting the religious domain itself. This is a step forward compared to the way things are now, when insignificance and mediocrity have rilly [*sic*] taken the place of the religious, so that the poet in the more ordinary sense is even higher than the religious.

In any case, it is certain that something poetic must be introduced into the religious domain simply to get hold of, to come to grips with, any existential ideals once again. (*SKS* 24:82–83, NB21:132, 1850 / *KJN* 8:78–79)

This task is implicit in Kierkegaard’s *Billeder* of Anna, the sinful woman, and others. What is esteemed is not artistic representation in and of itself but its service to human flourishing and to God. To cite Walsh once more, “In Kierkegaard’s view, the highest existential ideality is to be a Christian. Thus,

in his religious writings, he is primarily concerned to portray, like an artist, the ideal picture of a Christian.”<sup>20</sup>

### The Idol, the Icon, and Kierkegaard

I have sought to establish two overarching points. First, by examining Kierkegaard’s understanding of and approach to the concept of “image,” I have shown that Kierkegaard does not posit an ultimate decision between the aesthetic and the religious but rather exemplifies their careful integration. Second, I have underlined that Kierkegaard’s dialectical approach to this question correlates to the conception of the self developed in *The Sickness unto Death*, not to mention the way he viewed his task as an author. What has emerged is a kind of “aesthetics of the icon”—an aesthetics that points beyond itself, viewing art not as an end in itself but as a means toward religious and, with it, existential fulfillment.

In conclusion, I want to illustrate these findings by drawing on the work of the French thinker Jean-Luc Marion, particularly his well-known text, *God without Being (Dieu sans l’être)*, 1982). What follows is by no means a comprehensive reading of Marion’s oeuvre nor a suggestion that Kierkegaard’s views are somehow identical with Marion’s. The idea is more basic—namely, that Marion’s reflections can shed light on the various images populating Kierkegaard’s works and, in turn, on the Dane’s dialectical approach to aesthetic imagery.

Marion’s interest in the tension between idol and icon developed over time. In his early work on Descartes, he launched an attempt “to disconnect the link between metaphysics and the divine,” arguing that metaphysics—to the extent that it “defines” a supreme being for the sake of understanding other beings—always already lapses into idolatry.<sup>21</sup> In *God without Being*, as Christina M. Gschwandtner points out, he “pushes his definition of idolatry further by explicating a distinction between idol and icon.” Whereas Marion had earlier focused on the “specific idolatry of metaphysics,” he now posited a variety of idolatries, “moving from visual to conceptual, from simple to more complex.”<sup>22</sup> What these idols have in common is that they satisfy the intentions of those who apprehend them. For example, an image becomes an idol whenever “it suggests to the gaze where to rest.”<sup>23</sup> This, in fact, is what makes the idol charming: it relieves the observer of the burden of seeking something beyond it. As Marion puts it, “The gaze settles only inasmuch as it rests—from the weight of upholding the sight of an aim without term, rest, or end: ‘to sleep with the sleep of the earth.’” Idolatry, then, “reveals a sort of essential fatigue,” and this fatigue is perilous.<sup>24</sup> It wants its desires fulfilled on its own terms, and for that reason it is closed off to transcendence and, finally, to true divinity. Gschwandtner sums up Marion’s point this way: “The idol does indeed provide a vision of the divine, but a precise vision that is

fulfilled in the gaze and thus controlled by it. The observer of the idol grasps hold of the divine."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Marion sees the icon as that which "summons the gaze to surpass itself." One never really looks *at* the icon, since the icon serves as a medium through which one's vision goes "back . . . up the infinite stream of the invisible."<sup>26</sup> Hence, where the idol offers a circumscribed deity that is effectively a projection of human consciousness, the icon "becomes a kind of window through which the gaze travels toward the 'unvisageable,' that which cannot ever be contained in a human gaze."<sup>27</sup> This is why Marion refers to the icon as "excessive."<sup>28</sup> It does not so much contain its subject matter as communicate that its subject matter cannot be contained. "Idols abolish distance, while the icon preserves it."<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, Marion points out that, before the icon, it is actually the observer who is being observed: "The icon regards us—it *concerns* us, in that it allows the intention of the invisible to occur visibly." The challenge facing the iconographer, then, is to allow for this porous quality, to clear the way for the gaze of the invisible while simultaneously acknowledging that the invisible emerges "by its aim" alone. As Marion explains, "The icon lays out the material of wood and paint in such a way that there appears in them the intention of a transpiercing gaze emanating from them." As a result, the "aesthetics of the icon" is, in a certain sense, the absence of aesthetics. For, according to Marion, the idol "supposes an *aesthesis* that precisely imposes its measure on the idol," whereas the icon's "depth withdraws [it] from all aesthetics."<sup>30</sup>

Here—as in all of the above reflections—Marion walks the dialectical tightrope in a way that evokes, or illuminates, Kierkegaard's own approach to aesthetic imagery. For Kierkegaard, we recall, the danger of the image is that it will close off the observer from reality. This is true of Johannes the Seducer, who would rather fantasize about Cordelia than actually *be* in a relationship with her. But it is also true of religious persons or groups whenever they reduce the divine to an artistic or conceptual object, as opposed to a living *subject*. It is this circumscribed and attenuated perspective, so deftly portrayed by Kierkegaard, that corresponds to Marion's analysis of idolatry.

And yet, Kierkegaard also uses his pen to paint pictures of holiness. These images of holy persons such as Anna and the woman who was a sinner communicate the nature of faith—in particular, how it is a movement of dispossession, whereby the claims of the believer are renounced for the sake of divine adoration—and, in doing so, they echo the divine itself. For Kierkegaard's pictures are indeed "excessive." They convey that what they convey cannot be conveyed. Far from reducing the divine to human categories, they depict the great distance between human beings and God—a distance that is "closed" only through the paradox of worship, in which the person comes to recognize that he or she is beheld by the mysterious Other. Here, *in nuce*, is a type of Marion's notion of the icon.

In a well-known remark, Heidegger once said of the god of metaphysics, “Before the *causi sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard would register a similar concern about art and its tendency to reproduce gods of pleasure and utility. But both in practice and theory he suggests that it need not be so. When the aesthetic engenders worship, idolatry is supplanted by doxology. This may not be an aesthetics in the classic, Western sense of the term. Rather, it is an aesthetics of the icon.

### Notes

1. Joakim Garff, *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 121.
2. *Ibid.*, 334.
3. W. H. Auden, “Presenting Kierkegaard,” in *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, ed. W. H. Auden (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952), 3.
4. George Pattison, “Art in an Age of Reflection,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 97.
5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. *Ibid.*, 98.
7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 9, 18, 19, 32, emphasis in original.
8. *Ibid.*, 47.
9. *Ibid.*, 49, 51, 49, 51.
10. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Faith: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: SPCK, 1997), 76.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Kierkegaard owned a copy of the two-volume second edition of this work (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1837); ASKB 254–55.
13. Translated as “the picture” by the Hongs.
14. I have treated this subject extensively elsewhere. See Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2011). (See also James Rovira’s essay in the present volume.—Ed.)
15. Owned by the Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth, Pennsylvania.—Ed.
16. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 188.
17. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Walsh, *Living Poetically*, 224.
20. *Ibid.*, 226.
21. Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 40–41.

22. Ibid., 42–43.
23. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 12.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, 43.
26. Marion, *God without Being*, 18.
27. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, 132. See Marion, *God without Being*, 17.
28. Marion, *God without Being*, 21.
29. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, 132.
30. Marion, *God without Being*, 19, 20.
31. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 72.

