

Kierkegaard the Poet

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Kierkegaard frequently described himself as a poet and referred to his authorship as a form of «poet-communication.»¹ Since he clearly was not a poet in the narrow sense of the word, that is, a composer of verse, one must immediately ask in what sense he regarded himself as a poet and is considered to be such by others. If the meaning of the term «poetry» is expanded to encompass all forms of creative writing, as it often is in Danish, the poetic character of Kierkegaard's authorship becomes readily apparent. The lyrical style of his writing, the imaginative construction of his works using a variety of literary techniques and genres, and the abundance of artistic figures and metaphors employed to express their ideas and meanings provide ample testimony of that fact. But the poetic temper in Kierkegaard ran deeper than a flair for words and a genius for artistic forms and figures. Underlying the aesthetic features of his writings was a poetic passion for depicting ethico-religious ideals, with the aim of creating in the reader a «pathos for the existential» or subjective interest in striving to actualize those ideals in existence (*Pap. X 2 A 157/JP 6521*). It is primarily in this sense that Kierkegaard understood himself to be a poet and wished to be so regarded by others.

This concern for an existential presentation and embodiment of human ideals sets Kierkegaard apart not only from other philosophers and religious thinkers but fellow poetic writers as well. In his very first publication, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a literary critique of a novel by a contemporary writer, Hans Christian Andersen, Kierkegaard set forth two aesthetic criteria for becoming an authentic poetic writer of novels (*Romandigter*): a «life-development», which consists in forming a positive relation to actuality through striving toward a single goal in life, and a «life-view,» or an overarching in-

1. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols, ed. and tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, vol. 1, 1967; vol. 2, 1970; vols. 3 and 4, 1975; vols. 5-7, 1978), vol. 6, nos. 6511, 6521, 6391. See also *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2nd enlarged ed., 16 vols, ed. Niels Thulstrup, with index vols. 14-16 by N. J. Cappelørn (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978), vol. X 2 A 106; X 2 A 157; X 1 A 281.

ner confidence in life that enables one to have a firm, positive stance toward the challenges of life without being overcome by them². These criteria (both of which, in Kierkegaard's estimation, Andersen lacked) establish an integral connection between the life of the poet or creative writer and his or her poetic productions. They also provide a clue as to how Kierkegaard himself wished to be understood as an author in relation to his own poetic works. In his view, a genuine poetic work does not merely reproduce the life experiences of the author but transmutes that experience poetically so as not to identify the author with a particular character or perspective in the work.

As Kierkegaard continued to explore the relation between the life and artistic productions of a poetic writer in his early writings, he sought especially to distinguish his views from those of the German romantic poets, whose great aim was to «live poetically» as well as to produce works of art. (*SVI* XIII, 351/*KW* II, 280) While Kierkegaard agreed with the romantic call for a poetic life, he conceived the nature and conditions of such a life quite differently from the German romantics. Like them, he believed that the poet and others should strive to cultivate and realize themselves through a relation to the infinite or ideal. But whereas the romantic poets sought to create themselves by imaginatively playing or experimenting with an infinity of poetic possibilities, Kierkegaard called for the exercise of an «artistic earnestness» that recognizes the existential task to be a process of self-development of one's God-given potentialities rather than one of self-creation (*SVI* XIII, 352/*KW* II, 280) Everything was possible for the romantic poets, with the result that, as Kierkegaard characterized them, they flitted from possibility to possibility, leading an entirely «subjunctive», hypothetical, or abstract existence in relation to an «external infinity» or infinite ideal outside or beyond themselves. (*SVI* XIII, 353, 355, 367/*KW* II, 282, 284, 297) Over against this way of living poetically or relating to the infinite, Kierkegaard proposed a religious or Christian mode of living poetically in which one's given actuality undergoes a «transubstantiation» or inward change that renders it «inwardly infinite» via a relation to the infinite or eternal within. (*SVI* XIII, 367/*KW* II, 297) In his view, only an inward infinity is truly infinite and truly poetic, since only then does one possess and enjoy oneself in one's eternal validity; as such it constitutes the absolute condition for living poetically. (*SVI* XIII, 360, 368 z/*KW* II, 289, 298)

These two modes of living poetically, first distinguished in *The Concept of Irony*, are given poetic exemplification in Kierkegaard's early masterpiece, *Either/Or*. Composed in the form of an «arabesque novel» or mixture of literary genres, this work presents in Part I a kaleidoscope of poetic possibilities with which the anonymous aesthete presumed to be its author experiments

2. *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 1st ed., 16 vols, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and H. O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1906), vol. XIII, p. 63-64, 68. See also *Kierkegaard's Writings*, 26 vols., ed. Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978-1998), vol. I, pp. 70-71, 76.

in a romantic fashion. These include a variety of psychological states (melancholy, despair, boredom, suffering, and grief, for example) which are explored through a collage of representative figures drawn from classical literature (*Don Juan*, *Antigone*, and *Ahasverus the Wandering Jew*, to mention only a few) as well as characters created by the aesthete himself, such as Johannes the Seducer and his female victim, Cordelia Wahl, in «The Seducer's Diary». Over against this romantic experimentation with a multiplicity of possible self-identities, Part II sets forth an ethical pattern of living poetically exemplified by a single paradigmatic figure, its «author» Judge William. In two long epistolary essays addressed to the romantic aesthete, the judge tries to show the aesthetic validity of marriage in the first and the importance of choosing (as opposed to creating) oneself in one's eternal validity as a single, unified personality in the second. Emphasizing the poetic character of marriage, the judge argues that marriage acquires its aesthetic beauty or ideality through a historical process of inward striving or daily repetition of those qualities, such as faithfulness, humility, patience, honesty, and tolerance, that constitute the eternal in human relations. (SVI II, 88, 121, 126/KW IV, 96, 134, 139) In this way the personal life itself becomes a mode of artistic representation, providing not merely a semblance of the aesthetic ideal, as in other forms of artistic representation, but a reduplication of it in time and actuality.

Running counter to this positive understanding and appropriation of the poetic in Kierkegaard's early writings, however, is a strongly critical attitude toward poetry that is especially prominent in works from the middle period (1845-48) of his authorship, e.g. *Stages on Life's Way*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *Works of Love*, and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*. In these works Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms point out the dangers and limitations of poetry and urge a movement away from a merely imaginary or conceptual relation to existential ideals toward an ethical-religious actualization of them. But they also continue to maintain and develop a positive stance toward the poetic and aesthetic within an ethical-religious framework. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for example, the subjective thinker is described as an artist (*Kunstner*) whose task is to fashion his or her own existence into conformity with the ideal so as to make it a work of art. (SVI VII, 304/KW XII, 1:351) Moreover, the stages of existence — previously distinguished as aesthetic, ethical, and religious— are expanded to include the aesthetic categories of irony and humor as existential determinants that serve as boundary zones, or stages of transition, between the ethical (irony) and the religious (humor) as well as play an important role within the ethical and the religious as the incognito of hidden inwardness. Closely related to these factors and also figuring importantly in personal development are the aesthetic categories of the comic and the tragic, which give expression to the contradiction between the actual and the ideal, the inner and the outer in existential striving.

It is in the later, more specifically religious writings and journals, however, that Kierkegaard most clearly understands his task as a writer to be that

of a poet and his authorship as a whole to constitute a poet-communication. Describing himself as a «poet of the religious» and more specifically as a «Christian poet and thinker», Kierkegaard sees a need for a «presentation of the religious in poetic form» in order to get hold of and encounter the existential ideals once again in his time. (*Pap.* X 3 A 576, X 2 A 106, X 2 A 157, X 1 A 281/*JP*, 1792, 6511, 6521, 6391) In these writings, therefore, he is primarily concerned to depict, like an artist, the ideal portrait of a Christian, which in his view constitutes the highest existential ideality. This ideal is described dialectically on two levels, both in terms of its purely positive definition as consisting of faith, hope, love, joy, forgiveness, consolation, new life, and blessedness, and in terms of the negative factors through which these are experienced in existence: the consciousness of sin, the possibility of offense, suffering, and self-renunciation. Recognizing that to have Christianity only in imaginative form is not to have it, since being a Christian involves reduplication of the Christian ideal in actuality, Kierkegaard nevertheless views imagination and possibility as playing a crucial role in the process of becoming a true self or Christian. In *The Sickness unto Death*, imagination is regarded as the fundamental capacity by which all other capacities, such as knowing, feeling, and willing, are constituted, and possibility is seen as the condition of faith in God, who is virtually identified with possibility in this text. (*SVI* XI, 144, 151-153/*KW* XIX, 30-31, 38-40)

In Kierkegaard's view, the poet who is commissioned to portray the Christian ideality is required, no less than others, to strive toward reduplicating it in his or her own existence. Painfully aware of his own falling short in this regard, Kierkegaard characterized himself religiously as a penitent and «poet who flies to grace.» (*Pap.* X 6 B 215) He nevertheless distinguished himself as a religious poet from the ordinary poet by the fact that he was personally engaged in striving toward the ideal poetically presented. Without that, he concludes, his poet-communication of the ethical-religious ideal would be untrue. (*Pap.* X 2 A 184/*JP* 6528)

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