

## Kierkegaard, Friedrich, and the Romantic Pursuit of Artistic Re-interpretation

“It is characteristic of a period movement that kindred spirits from the most varied fields tend to support it,” explains author Wieland Schmied, “that identical ideas are stated in similar ways by various people, quite independently of each other, at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> Such an assertion seems particularly apt when comparing the lives and conceptual approaches of two towering figures of nineteenth century Europe: Søren Aabye Kierkegaard and Caspar David Friedrich.

While pinning labels on either risks limiting the scope and diversity of their output, it would be difficult to deny that their works are in some sense a product of their era, even as they themselves serve as unique focal points within that context. Consensus in placing Friedrich firmly within the era of Romanticism seems evident, but scholars display greater reticence in labeling Kierkegaard as such. Nonetheless, the overlapping timeframes, locales and themes expressed by these two figures present a topic worthy of further exploration. In particular, the shared Romantic concept of individual, internal re-interpretation and re-imagination of external events and objects places the work of Kierkegaard and Friedrich on very similar footing.

There are numerous parallels between these two. Søren Kierkegaard was born in 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark.<sup>2</sup> The son of a successful merchant, he studied theology as a young man and spent his life as an author of numerous books and articles addressing the true nature of Christianity. Caspar David Friedrich was born in 1774 in Greifswald, an area later to become part of Prussia.<sup>3</sup> The son of a craftsman, he studied art in Copenhagen and spent his life as an artist addressing themes of spirituality, nature and politics.

Contemporaries noted both men for their idiosyncrasies and melancholic disposition. Indeed, Friedrich’s obituaries focused on little else. Kierkegaard was more often than not judged by his personality and appearance than the merits of his writings.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, both faced

opposition for the unusual methods by which they pursued their tasks. Goethe at one point threatened to smash Friedrich's pictures against the side of a table. While some labeled him a "brilliant oddity," others denounced him for "neglecting the rules of art."<sup>5</sup> The famed pastor Nikolai Grundtvig dismissed Kierkegaard as a "scoffer," and Bishop Martensen said Kierkegaard's criticisms were not only Mephistophelean, but that his style of writing was due to a paucity of talent for traditional theological dogmatic discourse.<sup>6</sup>

This clash with the dominant culture led to misunderstanding, even among those who considered themselves admirers of the two. "Friedrich found imitators but no successors," states Schmied. The nature of his work "was too personal, too idiosyncratic, too religious in its motivation to attract disciples who might have developed it further." It was not until the twentieth century that his visionary efforts were fully acknowledged.<sup>7</sup> In a similar fashion, Kierkegaard's most vocal defenders – Rasmus Nielsen and Mogens Abraham Sommer – generally offered to the world caricatures of Kierkegaard's work that were at least as problematic as his opponents.<sup>8</sup> It was for this reason that Kierkegaard decided he would be truly understood and admired only after his death.<sup>9</sup>

Despite misunderstanding – and perhaps to a certain extent because of it – both men displayed an unusual devotion to this solitary work. Kierkegaard's first editor H.P. Barford, for example, "found the will to perseverance...behind Kierkegaard's mountain of paper to be almost unnatural."<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard himself explained his writing as the "prompting of an irresistible urge," and declared not only that he only felt well when productive, but further that "Productivity was my life."<sup>11</sup> Schmied comments on Friedrich's "exalted goals as an artist and his uncompromising pursuit of them," and goes on to note that "His works are a blend of calculation and asceticism, or of 'exactitude and spirit.'"<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard biographer Joakim Garff notes that such a work ethic was in many ways simply a product of the era. "In this respect Kierkegaard

was not notably different from many others of his day: they, too, drove themselves to productivity.”<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, where these two perhaps differed from the surrounding culture’s work ethic was in their efforts to conceal this devoted isolation from the world around them. “Everything was meant to seem free and spontaneous,” to Friedrich’s contemporaries; “no one was supposed to notice how much effort it cost him to create such calculated and meticulously executed paintings.”<sup>14</sup> For his part, Kierkegaard told his friend Emil Boesen that “my life is a great suffering, unknown and inexplicable to other people. Everything looked like pride and vanity, but it wasn’t.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, he even claimed to have arrived at plays and social functions just to be seen, at which point he would return quickly home to resume his work.

Such similarities, though, extend beyond the circumstances of their lives and their personal characteristics. These were two men powerfully motivated by ideas and ideals. This motivation reveals itself in their understanding of themselves and their work in relation to the world. Both took to heart the Romantic emphasis on the individual. “The foundation of all Romantic speculation is this,” according to Schmied, “that the ‘I’ liberated from all traditional bonds will ultimately discover its autonomy in a new and complete unity with the numinous.”<sup>16</sup>

In the dramatic leveling of democracy Kierkegaard feared the tyranny of the mob, but nonetheless held out hope that “the individual, in the separateness of his individuality, acquires the fearlessness of religion.” Freed from all institutions, the individual can “relate himself to God firsthand.”<sup>17</sup> Friedrich laments that “The philistines would prefer to curb every spontaneous upward leap of the soul, so that all might proceed along familiar and well-trodden paths...[but] art has to emerge from a person’s inner being...it has to do with one’s morality, one’s religion.”<sup>18</sup>

This focus on the individual and individual experience informed Kierkegaard's and Friedrich's understanding of their own work. Over and over again, Kierkegaard, either admittedly or otherwise, re-imagines reality through an inward process. Garff refers to Kierkegaard's journals, for instance, as wavering "between reality and the artistic reproduction of reality."<sup>19</sup> As well, he observes that when viewing a pastoral scene, Kierkegaard believed that "in itself the landscape was without much significance; it received its importance from the spectator who recalled something that the landscape might call to mind."<sup>20</sup>

"Kierkegaard did not *remember*," argues Garff, "he *recollected*" (emphasis original).<sup>21</sup> As Kierkegaard himself comments, "reality does not measure up to my burning desires."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, his own life did not match up to the ideals he expressed pseudonymously in his works – which were themselves for the most part artistic reinterpretations of his life – and so he therefore eventually produced another artistic reinterpretation of that life with his own signature.<sup>23</sup>

In a comparable manner, Schmied explains that "Friedrich could paint the external world only to the extent that he carried it in himself, had rediscovered and reexperienced it within."<sup>24</sup> As Friedrich himself says, "The painter should not merely paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees inside himself."<sup>25</sup> "Out of totally heterogeneous ideas," remarks Otto Schmitt on one of Friedrich's paintings, "but in both respects taking something real as a starting point, hopelessly blending fact and fiction and infusing reality with poetry, Friedrich set about creating his own painting."<sup>26</sup> Schmitt's comments on Friedrich's painting prove to be a remarkably apt description of Kierkegaard's writing.

To claim that these two shared all of their ideas in common would be to extend the comparison to the point of absurdity. Nonetheless, it is instructive to note the ways in which they remain analogous and how their similarities may reflect back upon the times in which they lived. If we can assert Friedrich's position as a Romantic with some certainty, then the connections

with Kierkegaard serve to raise the question of whether he may justifiably fit into that category as well – whether indeed these two were “kindred spirits from the most varied fields.” If that is the case, such a reevaluation may help shed new light or offer new insights into the interpretation of the often mysterious work of both men.

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<sup>1</sup> Wieland Schmied, *Caspar David Friedrich*, translated by Russell Stockman (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 28 December 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Schmied, 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Garff, 290-292, 313, 406-407, 435.

<sup>5</sup> Schmied, 10, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Garff, 578, 656, 767.

<sup>7</sup> Schmied, 38-40.

<sup>8</sup> Garff, 585, 682-700, 804-805.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 550, 812.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 433, 432.

<sup>12</sup> Schmied, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Garff, 111.

<sup>14</sup> Schmied, 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> Garff, 788.

<sup>16</sup> Schmied, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Garff, 490.

<sup>18</sup> Schmied, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Garff, 47.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 552-554, 564-565.

<sup>24</sup> Schmied, 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.