

Rogue Philosopher, Great Communicator

By JEFFREY FRANK

For years, visitors to the Copenhagen City Museum wandered into a modest room that contains a few artifacts from the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's life: portraits, meerschaum pipes, first editions and, best of all, the desk where he stood and produced with preternatural speed a series of original and difficult works, many of them written pseudonymously and published in editions that numbered in the hundreds — among them "Either-Or," "Fear and Trembling," "The Concept of Dread" and "Repetition." The exhibit has been refreshed to mark Kierkegaard's 200th birthday on May 5th. His belongings — a large library, furniture, paintings, and knickknacks — were pretty well dispersed after his death in 1855, but the expanded version will add an "outer circle" of relevant material. Manuscripts and papers from the Kierkegaard archives will be on display at the Royal Library.

The philosopher's grave is fairly close by, in Assistens Kirkegaard—his forbidding name is a variation of the Danish word for cemetery — in the Norrebro district, which is also the burial ground of many other notable figures, including Hans Christian Andersen, Niels Bohr and the American tenor saxophonist Ben Webster. Though in death he rests in this distinguished company, Kierkegaard was markedly less revered in life. His contemporaries saw him as a troublesome, quarrelsome figure. He was a familiar sight, strolling about the Old City, where he created the illusion that he was merely an underemployed gentleman. The satirical weekly *Corsair* published nasty caricatures of him and mocked his writing and pseudonymous disguises. He was gossiped about when he broke his engagement to the 18-year-old Regine Olsen, and was feared by his targets, among them, Hans Christian Andersen, whose early novels Kierkegaard eviscerated in his 1838 debut, "From the Papers of One Still Living." Shortly before he died at age 42, he began a bitter ground war with the state Lutheran church. For his biographers and interpreters, his private life remains a nest of secrets.

For all his well-known existential explorations — his fascination with life's dreadful uncertainties and his belief, set forth in "The Sickness Unto Death," that despair is central to the human condition — Kierkegaard will forever be associated with the "leap," an exertion of faith that helped him accept what he saw as the absurd idea that Jesus was simultaneously divine and yet much like other young men of his time; the question obsessed and perplexed him. As he put it in his major 1846 book "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophic Fragments," "The Absurd is that the eternal truth has come to exist, that God has come to exist, is born, has grown up and so on, and has become just like a person, impossible to tell apart from another person." Kierkegaard called this "the Absolute Paradox."

These were awkward questions for discussion in a public forum — particularly in a

small 19th-century monarchy with a dominant church. Kierkegaard came to realize that the subjects he cared most about — spiritual, deeply personal, wordless even — did not lend themselves to straightforward discourse. So he found a new way to communicate, letting his various pseudonymous “authors” say what a pedagogical doctor of theology could not. This was the Socratic method in epic form. It allowed Constantin Constantius in “Repetition” to hint that life might indeed be lived over; and it let Johannes de Silentio in “Fear and Trembling” retell the biblical story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac and to introduce what he called the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” the idea that one could disregard society’s legal and ethical boundaries in favor of a higher law. It was a dazzling thought experiment, and somewhat frightening, especially when you consider its extreme, all-too-familiar modern-day applications.

This subversive approach — “indirect communication” was the term he used repeatedly in “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” — was a way of saying: “Here is a secret that I cannot tell you — in fact, to say it outright would ruin it. Yet even without saying it, I think you get the idea.” Perceptive readers did get the idea without being told explicitly what it was.

This technique is familiar today; it’s what we experience in public debate, more widely with every advance in communications technology. The best commercial and political advertisements demonstrate it. Political candidates know that speaking directly to voters, telling them precisely what they stand for, may only be asking for trouble and that there are more effective ways to broadcast their views. The “dog-whistling” of modern campaigns — seemingly innocuous language used by surrogates and press officers to spread unruly opinions — is a method that Johannes Climacus, the “author” of the “Postscript,” would recognize.

Subjectivity (“inderlighed”), Kierkegaard wrote —in an almost contemptuous dismissal of the rational systems of 19th-century German philosophy — is truth. Yet inwardness and subjective reflection doesn’t leave much room for open discussion. Thus, he became the poet of the unsaid, the inexpressible — an artist-philosopher drawn to the mystery of powerful silence. It is a cliché to say that ideas matter, but they may matter more, and may be far more effective when they are communicated, as Kierkegaard suggested, without the intrusive voice of an insistent author. That’s one reason why, 200 years after his birth, in ways that are not always immediately apparent, Kierkegaard still matters.

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