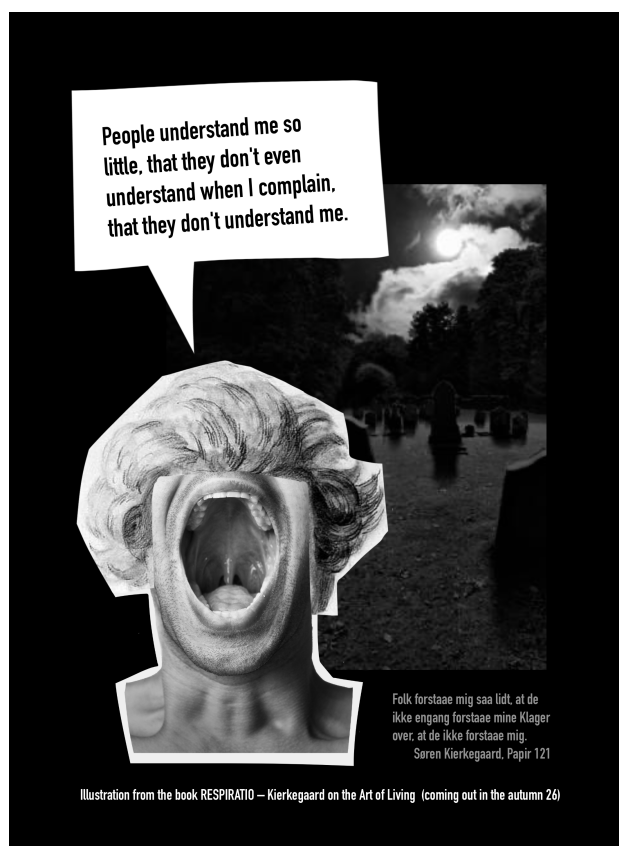


The very friendly assassination of Søren Kierkegaard

By C.F. Damgaard, artistic, somatic and absolutely unscientific Kierkegaard researcher.

... wasn't he all head and no body? ... a philosopher trapped in abstract thinking? ... is it true he never had sex?" ... was it his deeply religious father who had messed him up? ... is that why he broke off with his fiancée? ... is it fair to say he wrote about life in stead of living it? ... why should I take an interest then?

I often hear questions like these when I travel around sharing with others what Søren Kierkegaard called "the true art of living". If he were alive today, I imagine Kierkegaard would simply repeat:



"People understand me so little, that they don't even understand when I complain, that they don't understand me."

"Rambling and babbling and gossip instead of action is really what the human beings want, then they find it interesting."

Kierkegaard may already have been misunderstood in his own time, but since then it has only become worse.

What Kierkegaard feared the most has happened: His literary art has been turned into "scholarly knowledge", "speculation" and "scientific discussion".

What was meant to inspire wholehearted physical action, what was meant to awaken wonder and an innermost impulse to explore actual everyday life anew for oneself, has been turned into something that can be taught in scholarly settings.

"Nothing is more dangerous than turning what has to be practiced into scholarly knowledge. [...] scholarly knowledge seems to have substance and makes living it almost impossible."

"Speculation serves to categorize, classify, methodically put the various mental concepts into order; you don't love, you don't believe, you don't act, but you know what love, what faith is."

"The fundamental ruin of our time is [...] that it has become demoralized by intellectuality and has lost all character. So what I've got to watch out for, is, that my vocation, for the sake of God in heaven, doesn't become – seriously! – a scientific discussion, so that a bunch of professors and private lecturers and the like would feel tempted to join in. No, either indirect sharing – or in full earnest, if that's what it comes to, a matter of life and death. But above all not: scientific discussion."

Kierkegaard worked artistically – through what he called "indirect" or "artistic sharing" – not merely to describe "the indescribable", but to "make it happen" within the reader.

"Everything has become science [...] what has to be shared as art is being shared as science, and this is the confusion of the modern age."

Already in his own time Kierkegaard seems to have been frustrated that his ever-inspiring, ever-teasing, ever-challenging and ever-refreshing literary art wasn't really being practised, that no one seemed to really live it:

"Often I find it rather sad, that I, despite all the qualifications I've been given, am always left standing outside as a superfluity an impractical exaggeration. It's all quite simple though. Things are still far from being confused enough for them to really make use of me [...] But they'll see, it'll all end, with things being so desperate, that they'll have to make use of desperate people like me [...]"

Today, it seems to me, the state of things has become more than sufficiently desperate and more than sufficiently confused.

"Our communication devices get more and more exquisite [...] – but what's communicated gets more and more rushed and more and more confusing."

Already back then Kierkegaard found that the world had become "confused by too much knowledge". Imagine how he might react if he could witness how we today – all of us, it seems to me – try to know in advance how best to live our lives, how we try to think our lives instead of living them ... how we don't really exist:

"In our age the belief is, that knowledge is what's crucial, and if only you're told what the truth is, the shorter and quicker the better, then you're helped. But to exist is something completely different from knowing."

"There are many human beings, who arrive at a result in life just like schoolboys; who cheat their teacher by copying the right answer from the math book without having worked on the task themselves."

"Really, as we might sometimes with a certain relief think about, how Caesar had the entire Alexandrian Library burned down, in the same way we could with the very best intentions wish for humanity that all this overabundance of knowledge were taken away, so that we might once again get to know, what it is to live as a human being."

Kierkegaard invites the reader to never be certain of anything – except death – and to again and again experiment with what he calls "the art of forgetting" or "infinite resignation", so that the reader might once again remember "what it is to live as a human being".

He invites the reader to dance with life, to again and again dare wholeheartedly to live out one's innermost impulse or inspiration without having any knowledge of the result, and to again and again dare – what he calls "the highest wisdom of life" – to die, to "depart from life" ... which "also is to depart from one's mind" – he adds – to let "the masculine intellect" die:

"[...] the masculine intellect is directly related to a monstrous selfishness, that must be killed in surrendering."

"Death is the serious teacher [...], that at birth was appointed to each and every one of us for the whole life, and that always stands ready in the uncertainty to begin the lesson, whenever it's requested. [...] as soon as someone opens the door to uncertainty, the teacher is there."

Today "the masculine intellect" has come to dominate almost all aspects of our lives, it seems to me, no matter what gender we might have or not have. My own experience is that "the masculine intellect" has no desire to open up to "uncertainty" or to be "killed in surrendering" and whenever Kierkegaard speaks about "letting go", "becoming more and more simple-minded" or something like that, it very smoothly gets turned into some form of theoretical cleverness ... but:

"What needs to be worked against, was precisely cleverness. I guess that's the reason, that I, the one given the task, was equipped with such an overwhelming cleverness."

In my experience Kierkegaard's authorship is an artistic antidote to what was already taking over in his time: intellectual systematizing and cleverness.

"[...] my entire life as an author has been a systematically carried out, yes maybe with ten times the cleverness of the clever ones, carried out operation in the opposite direction."

This "operation" has led to lots of clever counter-measures being taken and no one has been more successful – no one more influential in shaping how we today (mis)understand Kierkegaard – than the acclaimed Danish intellectual Georg Brandes.

In 1877 Brandes published a book on Kierkegaard that was a "combative book" meant to "inhibit his influence", as he himself admits in a letter to Friedrich Nietzsche.

Brandes elegantly paints a picture of Kierkegaard as a vain, spoiled, self-obsessed and "weird thinker" who was mentally "ill" and "constantly writing". And I believe Brandes was the first to insinuate that Kierkegaard left his fiancée because of something "in the direction of the sexual."

I find all this to be gossip, smear and groundless speculation ... and even if it were true, it distracts from what matters: ... not how Kierkegaard lived his life, but what he wrote! ... and how I (when I'm the one reading it) then might start living my life.

"[...] it doesn't matter what or how I am. [...] just as the question of whether I wore a hat or a cap, only become the focus of attention, for those to whom the unimportant has become significant – maybe to compensate for the significant having become unimportant to them."

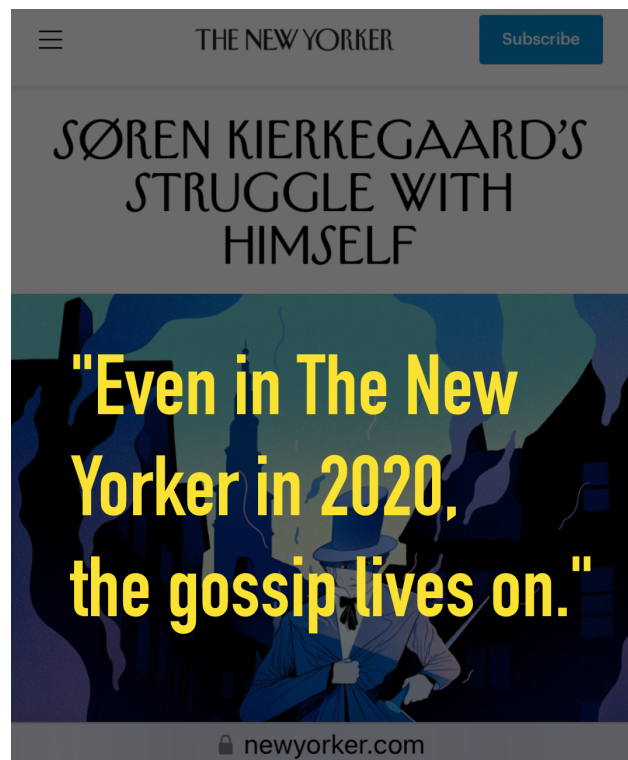
"[...] once I'm dead, how busy the lecturers will be butchering and preserving me and my work, how much competition there will be to say the same, maybe just in a more elegant linguistic style – as if that's what matters."

"I'll leave behind, intellectually, no small inheritance; oh, and I already know, who'll claim it, he will, that figure I find so deeply repulsive, he who's always inherited and always will inherit the best of it all: the lecturer, the professor. And even if "the professor" were to read this, that wouldn't stop him, no he'd lecture on that too. And even this last remark, if the professor were to read this, that wouldn't stop him, no, he'd lecture on that too."

The peculiar, often mentally incomprehensible and ever-wondrous literary art of Søren Kierkegaard has become something not to read, but to read about – and talk about – but rarely do anything about. It's been drowned in intellectuality, preventing it from breathing, preventing the art from being lived.

"Those cunning bastards! And yet this won't help, it won't help, even if also this were printed and read again and again – the lecturers would still find a way to profit off me, still lecture, maybe now just adding: what's remarkable about this is that it can't be lectured on."

Both his character and his authorship have been under mortal attack for more than 200 years now, but in the most friendly, civilised and academically approved way, of course.



Even in The New Yorker in 2020, the gossip lives on. Kierkegaard is described as "the Copenhagen eccentric" who "holes up in his apartment, where a kind of graphomania compels him to stay up all night writing at a frantic pace." Had Kierkegaard lived today, the article suggests, "the man would sooner or later end up in a psychiatrist's office, where he would probably be given a diagnosis of depression or bipolar disorder. [...] in the twenty-first century, he would recognize his propensities as symptoms—evidence of a psychological problem."

Kierkegaard has been analysed, admired and embraced to death by Brandes and his ever-growing chorus of echoes:

“That I will gain some amount of fame, even my fiercest enemy probably wouldn't deny. But I'm starting to wonder, if I might end up famous in a field quite different from what I imagined, if I might actually become famous as a naturalist, since I've made discoveries or at least a quite significant contribution to parasitology, the parasites I think of are preachers and professors, these greedy and vigorously multiplying parasites, who even have the indecency to (which to be fair other parasites would never do) present themselves as the true friends and admirers of those, whose suffering they feed on.”

Søren Kierkegaard has very effectively been assassinated, but then again: ... his writing is still very much alive! ... when it's read! ... and my hope is that this will make you want to do just that: read, read, read! ... the literary art of Kierkegaard ... for yourself! ... afresh:

“[...] how can one possibly avoid all the preconceived ideas, people bring with them to the reading of a book [...]? What hope is there of falling into the hands of fully open and unprepared readers?”

Find the original Danish Kierkegaard texts on cfdamgaard.com/essay – or don't.

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