

## **The Concept of Byrony**

D. Gantt Gurley

University of Oregon

*“The Concept of Byrony” examines Kierkegaard’s lyrical relation to Lord Byron. As an alternative to models of German influence, this paper discusses Kierkegaard’s quotations of Byron’s poetry and allusions to the poet himself. The paper establishes a poetical relationship between the two writers in terms of irony and metaphor. Kierkegaard’s sense of irony is creative but not unique; its roots can be located in earlier writings of the Danish Golden Age. Of particular importance is the development of irony in the works of Johan Ludvig Heiberg and the young writers that surrounded him, including the young Kierkegaard himself. It was in Heiberg’s salon where Byron seems to have first stepped into the Danish literary landscape. For Kierkegaard and Danish letters in general, the reception and celebrity-status of Byron perhaps play a more important role than his verse, although another acolyte of Heiberg’s, Frederik Paludan-Müller, wrote poetry that strongly illustrates Byron’s poetical influence in Danish verse. The paper also examines the Byronic notion of the empty sign, a metaphor that points to its own meaninglessness as a further poetic relationship. Moreover, the Byronic hero as a model for a lived life provided Kierkegaard with a powerful public mask that accompanied him to his last days. I term this mask and masquerade Byrony. In its conclusion the paper marks a significant similarity between the death-scenes and epitaphs of these major nineteenth-century European writers.*

*Gantt Gurley received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley in 2007. Before coming to University of Oregon he lectured at the University of California’s Scandinavian Department and was a Harry Starr Fellow in Judaica at the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University. His forthcoming book Meïr Aaron Goldschmidt and the Poetics of Jewish Fiction examines one of Denmark’s greatest nationalistic writers as first and foremost a Jewish artist, exploring his relationship to the Hebrew Bible and later Rabbinical traditions such as the Talmud and the Midrash as a form of poetics. He is currently working on two future publications. The first is a joint project that is mapping the sudden appearance of Rabbinic tales in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vernaculars in Northern Europe. The second is a study of the Wandering Jew legend in Long Romanticism, from Goethe and Schiller to Andersen and Hawthorne. A central aim of both projects and his research at large is to illuminate the mechanisms whereby Hebraic thought is reawakened in the European consciousness. His research and teaching interests include ancient and medieval song culture, the birth of the novel, Romanticism, Old Icelandic literature, the lyrical mode, fairy tales and folklore, and notions of religiosity in the Danish Golden Age.*

So short a time  
Have I then won.  
Then all strife  
at once dissolves.  
Might then I rest  
In rosen halls  
And without pause (forever)  
talk with my Jesus.

– The poem on Kierkegaard's grave<sup>1</sup>

The parameters of this volume, “Kierkegaard and German Thought,” are very interesting, particularly from the point of view of the Danish Golden Age (1800–1850). This is not to say that Kierkegaard was the immovable center of the Golden Age, only to point out that there is a certain elasticity involved in moving back and forth between the northern periphery and the very center of European philosophical thought. Denmark was its own center.<sup>2</sup> It is undeniable that early nineteenth-century Denmark was a siphon of German thinking and that this current, in turn, emanated back out of little Copenhagen to the grand stages of modern Western thought.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Kierkegaard was at the center of this confluence, but I am somewhat hesitant to privilege German thought over or separate from the active literary circles at home. After all, before he was German, Kierkegaard was forged in the literary and educational fires of his native Denmark, the country in which he is buried.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard's reviews of Hans Christian Andersen and Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773–1856) stand as beacons of nineteenth-century literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> The Corsair Affair is an expression of the deep and complex relation Kierkegaard had with the contemporary Copenhagen literary scene.<sup>6</sup> And his essay on Johanna Louisa Heiberg's performance of Juliet in the Royal Danish Theatre's production of the Shakespearean classic is a masterpiece of early

performance theory and establishes Kierkegaard's fondness for English literature.<sup>7</sup> In this essay I would like to focus on Kierkegaard's relationship to the literary currents that became popular in the second part of the Danish Golden Age. As the nineteenth century progressed and the unifying tenets of universal Romanticism began to weaken, Denmark's gaze began to turn westward, falling, as did most of Europe, into a fascination with Lord Byron and falling under the spell of all things Byronic.<sup>8</sup> Alfred Tennyson who was but fourteen when Byron died on April 19, 1824 recollected that dark day: "Byron was dead! I thought the whole world was at an end...I thought everything was over and finished for every one—that nothing else mattered. I remember I walked out alone, and carved 'Byron is dead' into the sandstone."<sup>9</sup> When Byron and the Byronic hero became all the rage in Europe, Denmark did not look away and neither did Copenhagen's Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the anti-British feelings in Denmark in the early part of the nineteenth century, English poetry found its way to Danish shores. In 1814, a copy of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was delivered into the hands of Christian Molbech (1783–1857), the great Danish historian, critic, and philologist. Jørgen Erik Nielsen presents evidence that from 1815 onwards Byron became a popular topic in the Danish press. By 1817, the year Bertel Thorvaldson (1770–1844) created the bust of Byron, Byron's first poems were translated into Danish. By the early twenties, most Danish readers were familiar with him, and in the following two decades he became a trope in current discussions of poetics and aesthetics.<sup>11</sup>

This essay explores the lyrical connection between these two poets, Byron and Kierkegaard, two figures obsessed with the intermingling of life and death with text. This irony, the poetics of converging life simultaneous with fiction, is not specifically Kierkegaardian.<sup>12</sup> These shared elements between life and text open the possibility of the poet's life being a hermeneutic key to understanding his poetry. Thorslev underscores this in his study of the Byronic hero by using phrases such as "autobiographical elements," "felt moods," and "attitudes analogous."<sup>13</sup> Life and poetry become two intertwined narrative acts that

illuminate a network of interpretive possibilities, most which give the reader a sense of intimacy with the figure of the poet. What Kierkegaard sees in Byron is that the reflexivity possible in a shared narrative. Though it may conceal more than it reveals, it is by its nature the possibility of repeated revealing and thus constant revelation. Lord Byron was quite good at this phenomenon—the lover, the vampire, the warrior, the cripple—and though he might have lacked the cerebral shadow of the Golden Age master, the one cast by him looms earlier and larger in the European imagination. This essay is a counter narrative to Kierkegaard the German philosopher; it is a counter narrative to the notion of boundaries of thought. For a moment, let us posit Kierkegaard as a Golden Age reader, a reader of the native tongue, a current reader and the currently read, in the hopes of illuminating the Byrony of Kierkegaard.

### **From the Grave**

The Danish Golden age famously emerged late in 1802, when the poet Adam Oehlenschläger, the father of Danish Romanticism, was inspired to compose the dramatic ballad “The Golden Horns” after an inspirational conversation with the mineralogist and philosopher Henrik Steffans (1773–1845). Steffans, a Norwegian by birth, had attended lectures by both Fichte and Schelling at the University of Jena, and had become personally acquainted with Novalis, Tieck, and the Schlegel brothers. It was he who brought the new *Zeitgeist* to Denmark. In his 1802 lectures at the University of Copenhagen, Steffans showed great influence of the Jena school of Romanticism, especially from Schelling and his ideas of the synthesis of poetry, nature, and the historical.<sup>14</sup>

In Oehlenschläger’s “The Golden Horns,” and his 1803 collection *Poems* in general, a new constellation of German ideals is articulated in the Danish tongue. In the country maiden who finds the beloved horns previously buried in the earth, we can see Herder’s *Volkgeist*. Schelling’s longing for historical unity can be found in the horns themselves, actual artifacts that dated back to 400 CE and then almost unbelievably, mysteriously disappeared. In most of the writings of the early Golden Age poets, the work of the Grimm brothers, Arnim and

Brentano are the models for the literary celebration and promulgation of a national folklore and mythology. “The Golden Horns” is an anthem to *Universalromantik*, the harmonizing unity of the poetic imagination. The discovery of the horns themselves was reward for man’s antiquarian impulse.

The horns are both a symbol of the mythic past and the new modern attitude of brotherhood, introspection, and yearning for the beyond:

In olden days  
 Long lost  
 When the earth was radiant  
 And the East shone in the north,  
 Give us a glimpse back.<sup>15</sup>

But the subsequent loss of the horns is due to man’s earthly desires:

What they gave, they now take back  
 The holy remains forever vanish.<sup>16</sup>

In May of 1802 the actual artifacts were stolen from the royal cabinet and were never recovered, an untenable expression of human momentariness. The mystery surrounding their existence is confirmed in Oehlenschläger’s poem, where the historical is something traced through the revelations of nature, culminating in a universal spirit. The re-disappearance of the horns once filled with the blood of Christ signals an end to the teleological world patterning of the Enlightenment and incites the literary imagination of a new generation. Time is metaleptic and the present becomes sacrificed to the ideality of the past. We must give “a glimpse back” in order to proceed.

The universal pantheon of antique Scandinavia and Christianity as taught by Oehlenschläger shows itself to be somewhat unstable in the early Golden Age. In his 1805 *Poetic Writings*, Oehlenschläger continues the romantic worship of nature but strays from the pantheism of his 1803 *Poems*. In “The Life of Christ Symbolized in the Seasons” nature is the mirror of Christ’s glory:

Where are you, holy spirit  
 Where are you, sweet Jesus  
 No longer can I find you,

But deep in the recess of the forest,  
A young man, I see you.<sup>17</sup>

The deification of the Old Norse ideal in the 1803 *Poems* turns to a full-blown national mythology in the 1807 *Nordic Poems*. There, two longer cycles, “Thor’s Journey to Jotunheim” and “Baldur the Good,” show influence from both the *Prose Edda* of the thirteenth-century antiquarian Snorri Sturleson and Friedrich Schiller’s (1759–1805) 1803 drama *The Bride of Messina*.<sup>18</sup> For the early Oehlenschläger mythology was based in “eternal nature,” a notion that made it superior to the narratives of human history. Summarizing this early phase of Danish Romanticism, he claimed mythology to be “the product of an entire nation’s character and way of thinking and feeling.”<sup>19</sup>

### **To the Mountain**

But this view eventually clashes with the Christian ethos. As Oehlenschläger continued to write on mythological themes, others changed directions and inspired a new poetic consciousness that became critical of the glorification of nature. Unlike the earlier Romantics, the poetic realists were not limited to the dualistic narrative of having to harmonize nature with the divine, the real with the ideal.<sup>20</sup> One of these was Johan Ludvig Heiberg, who harshly yet elegantly criticized Oehlenschläger’s sentimentality and “the dissolution of formal strictness.”<sup>21</sup> For Heiberg, nature was material phenomenon.

One of Heiberg’s first literary sensations was his 1817 *Christmas Fun and New Year’s Jest*, a parody of Danish sentimentality and especially of Oehlenschläger’s poems. The play is spectacular for its sublime sense of romantic irony. In the “Intermezzo,” the poet himself appears on stage and becomes entangled in the action of the play. Furthermore, there rushes on stage a Harlequin who is directing another play on the stage. The characters in this second play (the play within the play) are animated objects: a glass, a flask, a shawl, a pair of German speaking boots that is somewhat of a lush, etc. Total confusion ensues when the poet announces (to the audience) that he will “use his superior force” to “lift up my immaterial soul’s dominion.” He then signals for a

clock to ring, whereupon a Watchman in the back of the theatre takes a draw on his pipe and cries out “Fire!” The shawl and the gloves shout anxiously in response: “Where is the fire? Where is the fire? Surely, not in the playhouse?” The Harlequin responds, “Where is the fire, Watchman?” “In Ulfeldt’s square.” He draws again on his pipe and shouts out more “Fire!” The curtain drops.<sup>22</sup>

The scene here is remarkably complicated. The cry of fire (which is later revealed by the fire marshal to have been the Watchman’s pipe crying out as an actor in the Harlequin’s play) becomes differently interpreted and therefore confused across several narrative levels: the theatre audience, the audience on the stage, and the actors in the Harlequin’s play.<sup>23</sup> There also seems to be another level of irony invoked by the Watchman’s reply that the fire is in Ulfeldt’s square, an area that was almost completely burned in the great fire of 1728. This play stands as one of the earliest instances of the contemporary irony that will come to define Golden Age literary aesthetics. Kierkegaard himself reads this exact scene from *Christmas Fun and New Year’s Jest* in the *Diapsalmata* and induces the irony of a repeated layering by reading a comical eschatology into the scene:

In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed—amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke.<sup>24</sup>

Here Kierkegaard inverts the scene, amplifying narrative doubt onto the divine. The irony is not constructed from the narrative game that results from hiding actors in the audience—something that the playwright, Heiberg, is in control of—but rather from the misreading of that scene, which allows for the divine voice to be ironically no more than the theatrics of a stage clown. The audience in both cases cannot tell fact from fiction, onstage from offstage, interpretation from revelation. However, in Heiberg’s version the game is induced from the narrative playing with physical space and voice, whereas in the

Kierkegaard reference narrative space mediates between the ignorance nested in being a spectator and the ludic gesture of damnation itself. The metonymic loop between the Watchman's pipe, the fire offstage and the Apocalypse are active only because Kierkegaard's narrator too thinks the Watchman's pipe is the Watchman who is not playing a Watchman. In this way, Kierkegaard burns his narrator.

While lecturing at the University of Kiel from 1822–25, Heiberg discovered Hegelian speculative philosophy and brought it to Denmark. Heiberg was the editor of *The Copenhagen Flying Post*, the most important literary journal of the Golden Age; he created the Danish vaudeville tradition; he was the director of the Danish Royal Theatre; and he was the gatekeeper of Golden Age aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> He and his wife Johanne Louise, the leading Danish actress of the nineteenth century, played host to many of Denmark's finest artists in the "the closest Danish counterpart to the French salon."<sup>26</sup> Among the participants in the early Heiberg school of the mid-thirties were H.C. Andersen (1805–75), the poet Frederik Paludan-Müller (1809–76) and the young writer Søren Kierkegaard.

Heiberg rejected the divine temple of nature of the early Romantics in favor of the individual's quest for truth, a realization based on the renunciation of the material world. Heiberg offers a new path to God, an intimate dialogue through the vehicle of the self, the dominion of "immaterial soul." Contra Oehlenschläger, the bower of Christ is not hidden deep in the forest primeval; God is already in the depths of man. This new ethos was articulated in Heiberg's work *New Poems* published in 1841, particularly in the last stanza of his poem "Protestantism in Nature."<sup>27</sup>

#### IV

The god you seek is your own god,  
 What more do you want?  
 He is not revealed like an object  
 Among many others.  
 You feel him every time your heart pounds  
 From holy passion;



You hear him in your best thoughts  
As eternal voice.  
As you seek, you have found all of him  
As you ask, are all answers won.

Nature, lovely in all its splendor  
Is all too feeble  
To illuminate him  
Through its still efforts  
a suitable ensemble.<sup>28</sup>

The poem's "you" is reflexive. It is the narrator speaking to the reader; the narrator speaking to himself; God revealing himself through the voice of the narrator, the reader, the poet. It bends between subject and object, synonymously eliding with both. The materiality of nature becomes too thin to conceal God; he must come from the individual, the light inside. This absorption of light redistributed from nature and into the inwardness of the poet is a move towards the Kierkegaardian individual and the eternal conversation with God.

V  
Spirit's light in the chamber of the soul  
Glimmers with bright flashes,  
It sees God and itself in the same flickering,  
Within the same vision.  
And by the light, which like a star,  
Ascended in mankind's breast,  
It shall unfasten nature  
The Spirit becomes clear and lifts its voice,  
And mankind who in vain asked it of late,  
shall answer  
And mortal life revealed  
As a striving towards freedom's light.<sup>29</sup>

Here we have Hegel's inner and external light, the movement of consciousness from east to west as allegorized in *The Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.<sup>30</sup> Heiberg's *New Poems* also follows this pattern as text begins on "Pentecost Morning." The light in the east is cast as the fire of the Holy Spirit descending over mankind; solar clarity following man's movement from his origins in the Near East to the conscious European mind. For Heiberg this trope of light is also in conversation with John 8:12: "I am the light of the world."<sup>31</sup> The radiance of man weighs more on the epistemological scale of being than the mirroring effect of nature.

Yet the tenets of the early Romantics still remain traceable, as this dawning light also harkens back to the Old Norse ideal, when "the East shone in the North." The mythical illumination of Oehlenschläger's *Skinfaxe* is realized by a further glimpse back, to the evangelical light of Christ. The divine lamp is something from which even nature cowers; for, nature is only the masquerade of the infinite. It, like the bodies of men, only borrow the astral light of the divine. In reviewing Heiberg's 1841 collection, the critic Eggert Christopher Tryde described this movement away from the materialism of nature as the poetical genius of "the Christian religious consciousness."<sup>32</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard also participates in this conversation about the emptiness of nature. When Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, gives his prized desk a blow with his hatchet, feverishly trying to gather coach payment from his money drawer early one summer morning, he discovers the secret compartment that contain the two collections of papers. He quickly packs them into a mahogany box that "usually contained a pair of pistols" and heads out for his weeklong vacation to the intoxicating countryside of Hillerød.<sup>33</sup> The very first morning of his trip, he has his servant bring along the box and seeks "a romantic spot in the forest" where he might begin to survey the papers safely in detail.<sup>34</sup>

In this fascinating episode, the nature of both Oehlenschläger and Heiberg is turned into a place of contrived revelation. It is not the divine surfacing of a lost age nor the veil that, when removed, elucidates the divinity inside the individual;

it is a staging for a set of dueling perspectives brought from the wooden writing station of culture out into the natural surrounding—material and completely undivine. Somehow, Eremita's A and B papers are a replacement for the two dueling pistols and yet, in themselves, replace the mysticism of the pair of golden horns. The sleight of hand becomes a gesture that reveals nature to be an empty sign, and Kierkegaard's specific designation of a "romantic spot" connotes a staging of the ironic, much like the Watchman's pipe calling "Fire" in the crowded theatre house: it causes you to look when nothing is actually there.

Heiberg's poetical realism becomes challenged by his own acolytes, especially Søren Kierkegaard. It is understandable why this younger generation of writers would be interested in the more popular currents of European Romanticism, and it is the figure of Lord Byron that provides a living, contemporary model to this developing Golden Age sense of irony. The new generation of poets departed from the idealism and ethereal harmony of universal Romanticism and distanced themselves from the religious consciousness of Heiberg's new poetic ideal. The notion of *Zerrissenheit* or "fragmentation" begins to taint the monistic purity of the poetic ideal.<sup>35</sup> Darkness, abandon, exile, and the demonic, begin to hijack the tropological fabric of this new *romantisme*, a term I will define in relation to the tenets of Byronism: vulgar and rebellious individualism, with quick emphasis on the disharmonic and a propensity for the exilic.<sup>36</sup> The move inward is not the inner light of a religious consciousness, for Kierkegaard and for Byron, it was a plunge into an even more complex, powerful and alienating existence where the shroud of language was even more fragile, and despair a demonic intruder. As Manfred confesses to the Witch of the Alps:

Daughter of Air! I tell thee, since that hour—  
 But words are breath—look on me in my sleep,  
 Or watch my watchings—Come and sit by me!  
 My solitude is solitude no more,  
 But peopled with the Furies;—I have gnash'd  
 My teeth in darkness till returning morn,

Then cursed myself till sunset;—I have pray'd  
 For madness as a blessing—'tis denied me.  
 I have affronted death—but in the war  
 Of elements the waters shrunk from me,  
 And fatal things pass'd harmless; the cold hand  
 Of an all-pitiless demon held me back,  
 Back by a single hair, which would not break.  
 In fantasy, imagination, all  
 The affluence of my soul—which one day was  
 A Cræsus in creation—I plunged deep,  
 But, like an ebbing wave, it dash'd me back  
 Into the gulf of my unfathom'd thought.  
 I plunged amidst mankind—Forgetfulness  
 I sought in all, save where 'tis to be found.  
 And that I have to learn; my sciences,  
 My long-pursued and superhuman art,  
 Is mortal here: I dwell in my despair—  
 And live—and live for ever.<sup>37</sup>

Byron here makes his Manfred into the eternal wanderer Ahasveras, a figure of repetition and despair.<sup>38</sup> Poetry itself and its revealed religious consciousness has failed Ahasveras/Manfred here, "words are breath." The poet's "superhuman art" falls short of substantiating or delivering the divine lamp. Affluence and reward are stripped from the wanderer. All that is needed is forgiveness, but all that is found in the depths of inward ocean of thought is despair. Kierkegaard has this Ahasveras/Manfred in 1845 mind when he writes about the worth of being able to grant forgiveness in his *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*.<sup>39</sup> The two passages are striking in their thematic relation to one another:

[Y]et surely no king who rules over kingdoms and countries, no  
 Croesus who possesses everything, and no philanthropist who  
 feeds the hungry possesses anything as great or has anything as

great to give away or anything as needful to give away a the person whose forgiveness someone else needs.<sup>40</sup>

Kierkegaard too alludes to the legend of the Lydian king Cræsus in order to show how pale earthly possession and value are in the face of forgiveness. If we read this passage against Byron's, it is particularly divine forgiveness which is withheld from the Wandering Jew, thus his despair, but exactly that lacking which testifies to the richness of God. Language here is too fragile to crystallize the poetic consciousness as Heiberg's "eternal voice." For Byron, this constant tension between poetic creation and the fragility of language is marked by what Vincent Newey has described as "only a tissue of empty signs..."<sup>41</sup>

In fairness, we must consider E.T.A. Hoffman and Heinrich Heine alongside Byron as the template of *romantisme* in Danish letters, but it was the living-life of Lord Byron, Byron the celebrity, the seducer, the warrior-poet, who is the new heroic model for the Golden Age in the mid-1830's.<sup>42</sup> Concrete evidence of Kierkegaard's intertextual relationship with Byron is sparse but certainly not casual, for we know that he had in his library a German edition of Byron's complete works.<sup>43</sup>

### **To the Graveyard**

There are eight overt references to Byron in Kierkegaard.<sup>44</sup> Two of the passages are from the essay on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in *Either/Or* and concern Byron's venture to "bring Don Juan into existence for us, to tell us of his childhood and youth, to construct him out of context for his finite life-relationship."<sup>45</sup> A is skeptical of Byron's attempt to mold the figure into an identity with himself and states, "Therefore, Byron's *Don Juan* must be regarded as a failure because it stretches out epically."<sup>46</sup> This reflective materialism (the externalization of figure) strips Don Juan from his "ideality" and gives him an individualism that defies the ability to seduce immediately, "with a single blow." The biographical nature of Byronism insures the reflection of the poet in the epic mode and this, in turn, corrupts the ideality of power present in Mozart's musical figure.

However, Eremita is careful to admit, somewhat jokingly, that “the reason [of the failure] was not in Byron but in something far deeper.”<sup>47</sup> For Kierkegaard, one does not claim the infinite through the language of poetry. The individual is bound in an endless conflict with his surroundings.<sup>48</sup> Byron, although recognized by Eremita with certainty as poetically endowed, is working in a medium unable to substantiate the abstraction of Mozart’s masterpiece. Language is too reflective; its tissue too flimsy to rival the power of music. This reading of the failure of poetry to delimit finitude is pointing to the emptiness that belies the topological fabric of language itself.

In “The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage” from part B of *Either/Or*, Judge William comments on two of Byron’s poems from *The Hours of Idleness*, “To Eliza” and “The First Kiss of Love.” In talking about “the true eternity of love,” an act that dismisses the sensuous, Judge William claims that it is fitting for Byron to declare “it is not only Byron who declares that love is heaven and marriage hell.”<sup>49</sup> This is reference to “To Eliza,” where the line actually reads, “Though women are angels, yet wedlock’s the devil.”<sup>50</sup>

Later, in his discussion of first love, Judge William makes a distinction between temporal and eternal reflection. For the former, the first kiss “will be a past (just as Byron has put it in a short poem); for the person who reflects eternally, there will be an eternal possibility.”<sup>51</sup> The short poem is “The First Kiss of Love,” and it seems Judge William is thinking of the final stanza: “When age chills the blood, when our pleasures are past—/For years fleet away with the wings of the dove—/The dearest remembrance will still be the last,/Our sweetest memorial the first kiss of love.”

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Vigilius Haufniensis brackets Byron with Shakespeare and Percy Shelley as poets whose words break down silence. While discussing the figure of Mephistopheles and the terrible power of language, Haufniensis writes, “Even though the word was terrible, even though it were a Shakespeare, a Byron, or a Shelley who breaks the silence, the word always retains its redeeming power, because all despair and all the horror of evil expressed in a word are not as terrible as silence.”<sup>52</sup> We know that Shakespeare

had great status in Kierkegaard's writings, but it is quite interesting to learn that Byron and Shelley, and not any of Denmark's native poets nor any of the German Romantics, are given this distinction.<sup>53</sup> Byron for Kierkegaard is the poet who embodies the spirit of defiance, the highest form of despair; Byron is the noble demonic.

The remaining references can be found in the journals and notebooks from Kierkegaard's Faustian period (1836–37), where Byron is mentioned three times in the journals.<sup>54</sup> While reading Karl Ernst Schubarth's *Ueber Goethe's Faust* from 1830, which contains a discussion of *Faust* and Byron's *Manfred*, Kierkegaard writes, "He [sc. Schubarth] shows that some have simply understood the poem to be a complaint that he was denied the highest pleasures of life, and that Lord Byron has reproduced the matter and content in F.[aust] from this standpoint."<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to mention Byron as one of the sources for Schubarth's new Devil theory, saying that "He calls attention to the fact that other great poets, for instance Klopstock, Milton, and even Lord Byron in his *Cain* have understood the Devil from another side."<sup>56</sup> Several days later in his papers he again makes reference to *Manfred*, "Probably Lord Byron's *Manfred* is *Faust* without a Goethean *educating* Mephisto?"<sup>57</sup> Some fourteen years later in 1850, Byron makes his final appearance in Kierkegaard's journals, "Take a cripple. Yes, one who wishes to enjoy life on a grand scale (a Lord Byron, for example) could certainly wish to be healed—but not on the condition that he has to die to the world once and for all. On the other hand, if one is going to die to the world once and for all, it makes no great difference one way or the other whether or not one is a cripple."<sup>58</sup>

There is also the likely possibility that the essay *Rotation of Crops*, which begins with a description of boredom and idleness, is pointing back to two stanzas in *Don Juan*.<sup>59</sup> The first is from Canto XIII, "Society is no one polish'd horde,/Form'd of two might tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*." In the following Canto, Byron mentions that after all the love has been made, "There's little left but to be bored or bore." In *The Rotation of Crops*, creation itself seems to be the product of a celestial boredom and is instrumental in defining the rabble from the noble:

“All human beings, then, are boring... Those who bore others are the plebians, the crowd, the endless train of humanity in general; those who bore themselves are the chosen ones, the nobility.”<sup>60</sup> This notion is already in the *Diapsalmata*, where A remarks, “How dreadful boredom is—how dreadfully boring; I know no stronger expression, no truer one, for like is recognized only by like.”<sup>61</sup>

There is also a passage in *Rotation of Crops* that seems to be a critique of the Byronic, a position which lacks the last layer of the ironic in order to qualify as Byrony.

The more poetically one remembers, the more easily one forgets, for to remember poetically is actually only an expression for forgetting. When I remember poetically, my experience has already undergone the change of having lost everything painful. In order to be able to recollect in this way, one must be very much aware of how one lives, especially how one enjoys.

Kierkegaard is warning how a life led too indiscreetly, a life of too much pleasure, can lead to not being able to remember nor forget. This is the danger of Byrony, to become vexed in the masquerade whose very purpose is to ward off the dissipation of language. Byrony is thus an apotropaic gesture to conceal reflectivity and the emptiness of poetic language in the endless reflection between text and life.

From all these references, both direct and global, it is clear that Kierkegaard had read quite a bit of Byron: *The Hours of Idleness*, *Don Juan*, *Manfred*, *Cain*, and as Ryan suggests, it was more than likely he also read *Childe Harold*, the image par excellence of the restless poet of despair.<sup>62</sup> For the new generation of poets Byron was an escape from the confinement of Heibergianism. Frederick Paludan–Müller (1809–76) was both a contemporary of Kierkegaard in the Heiberg salon and the writer first accredited with bringing Byron to the Danish literary public in his 1833 poem *The Dancer*.<sup>63</sup>

In the poem a beautiful dancer, Dione, has a torrid love affair with a Count who later deserts her to marry a woman more suitable to his mother’s design. Before they can marry, however, the Count is killed in a duel. As he lies dying



Count Charles confesses his love to Dione who subsequently dies from insanity. During her time with the count Dione had read among other things Byron's *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *The Corsair*. There are also formal features that link *The Dancer* with Byron's works. Paludan-Müller employed Byron's favored *ottava rima*, eight-line stanzas in iambic pentameter consisting of three alternate rhymes and one double rhyme. This use of scheme not only breaks formally from the *Nibelungen* stanza used by Oehlenschläger, but it represents a shift from those earlier aesthetics of unity. There is also influence evident in certain metaphorical patterns: Byron's use of lightning as the quickness of mental radiation and Paludan-Müller's use of lightning to show immediacy and quick departure. Paludan-Müller's infatuation with Byron is also evident in the transitory quality of the passages that meander in and out of the narrative. This conveys a certain sensuality and reflection to the act of reading. But the stark dissonance of the text lays at the heart of *romantisme*, the beautiful and fragile lover painfully driven to a haunting madness, leaping to her watery death, which for Byron was the very topos of lyric: "Dark Sappho! Could not verse immortal save/That breast imbued with such immortal fire?"<sup>64</sup>

The poet Emil Aarestrup (1796–1876) translated Byron in Kierkegaard's lifetime. Christian Winther's (1796–1876) *Some Poems* from 1835 and, in particular, the poem "Annette" show influence in Kierkegaard.<sup>65</sup> In those poems the familiar self-reflexive Byrony is present and like Paludan-Müller's poem, Winther uses Byron's *ottava rima*. It is possible that Kierkegaard had even attended a reading of Winther's.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless it is most telling that the second edition of *Either/Or* was dedicated to Winther. Furthermore, he is called once in Kierkegaard's journal his "preferred poet," a term reserved exclusively for the likes of Shakespeare and Goethe.<sup>67</sup> The novels of H.C. Andersen, especially *O.T.* (1836) and *Only a Fiddler* (1837) also present the predominant moods of Byronism. Oehlenschläger himself, as Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Copenhagen, oversaw the dissertation of the young Icelandic literary scholar Grimur Thorgrimmson Thompson entitled "On Lord Byron."

Carl Bagger (1807–46) lived a Byronic life and wrote his bohemian, anti-Christian, disharmonic world-view into his 1835 novel *My Brother's Life*. There the protagonist's brother Johannes, an avid reader of Byron, is a raging alcoholic who lives in the underbelly of Copenhagen society, until he succumbs to the fatal illusion of an unstoppable world revolution. Meïr Goldschmidt's first novel *A Jew* (1845) projects the lurid tension of a Byronic Jew, a figure whose exile is not self-imposed but self-containing. Goldschmidt wrote a two-part essay on Byron in his journal *North and South* in 1851.<sup>68</sup> In 1852, Goldschmidt also translated Byron's *Cain* in *North and South*. This work stands as the last and perchance greatest testimony to Danish Byrony in Kierkegaard's lifetime.

Although there are only a handful of overt references to Byron in Kierkegaard, there is a stream of Byronism that emerges in his writing in the 30's and 40's. The irony of Kierkegaard has its roots in Heibergianism, but it was the sensation of Byron both home and abroad, Byron the *figura*, that fed Kierkegaard's fascination with the performative boundaries between life and text, between self and public. Concerning Byron's influence on Kierkegaard, Henning Fenger once wrote:

Here is both the English *spleen*, the German *Zerrissenheit* and French *maladie du siècle*, three labels covering the whole range of passionate feeling, of loneliness and contempt as well as of irony and bitter sarcasm...The Kierkegaardian hero of these years, whether nameless or called Johannes the Seducer, is filled with pessimism, nihilism and some degree of sentimentality. He has the mark of Cain on his forehead and demonstrates as many interesting poses as do the heroes of Byron...Kierkegaard accepted only the attitudes and costumes of Byronism.<sup>69</sup>

It is also a deeper irony that Kierkegaard's references to Byron cluster in the early part of his writings, when he was more engaged with both Hegel and Heibergianism. If Kierkegaard was only a Byronist in dress, certainly the sensationalism that he creates in the inter-space between his life, on the one hand, and his authorship, on the other, would not resonate so deeply after his

passing. Yet it is in his death where the convergence of the two poets seems the greatest. The mythology of the man Søren Kierkegaard begins to crystallize the moment death is certain. The shadow he casts, even today, stretches out over Golden Age Denmark to the very center of European thought.

The death of Kierkegaard, I think, signals two great moments in Danish literary history. On the one hand, it signals the end of the Danish Golden Age. On the other, it marks the demise of Danish Byronism. Kierkegaard's sense of irony is in no place better illustrated than from his deathbed. He makes two refusals that he was quite aware were public performances. He declined to receive the Eucharist by a pastor and refused to see his brother, Peter Christian. He later inquired of Emil Boesen whether this last act had created a "public stir."<sup>70</sup> Less than a month later, he was gone. H. C. Andersen wrote of the scene at Kierkegaard's burial:

Søren Kierkegaard was buried last Sunday, following a service at the Church of Our Lady. The parties concerned had done very little. The church pews were closed, and the crowd in the aisles was unusually large. Ladies in red and blue hats were coming and going; item: a dog with a muzzle.<sup>71</sup>

I cannot think of a more Byronic moment in the lived-life of Søren Kierkegaard. The most solemn of Protestant rituals becomes public spectacle.

Let us compare J.C. Hobhouse's description of the scene at Byron's funeral on July 16, 1824:

"The churchyard and the little church of Hucknall were so crowded that it was with difficulty we could follow the coffin up the aisle. The contrast between the gorgeous decorations of the coffin and the urn and the humble village church was very striking. I was told afterwards that the place was crowded until a late hour in the evening, and that the vault was not closed until the next morning."<sup>72</sup>

The hyperbolic nature of these two funerals marks the transgression between fiction and reality, and in these two deaths we have perhaps the birth of the modern literary celebrity. Fittingly, the lines on Byron's grave are from Canto IV

of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Again we see the familiar struggle with the fragility of poetic consciousness, the breath-like inadequacy of language to confront the eternal. They are perhaps the most Kierkegaardian lines Byron ever wrote and resonate with the little poem in Copenhagen:

“But there is that within me which shall tire  
Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise noted. These enchanting and somber lines are written on his plain gravestone in Assistens-Kierkegaard in Copenhagen. They are reminiscent of the iconology of *Dat Rosa Mel Apibus*; they expose the fleetingness of this world which through labor and toil can deliver one to the table of the Lord. The Danish word *uafledelig* ‘without interruption’ or ‘incessantly’ stands out for me here, reminding us that the earthly life for Kierkegaard was a constant disruption.

<sup>2</sup> Meïr Aaron Goldschmidt (1819–87) ironically made this claim with an illustration of Kierkegaard at the center of the entire universe in his *Corsair*, no. 285, March 6, 1846.

<sup>3</sup> This southern stream seems to be predominant only in the very early stages of the Golden Age.

<sup>4</sup> As iconoclastic as Kierkegaard was or was to become, his attachment, at least in his early literary career, to Johan Ludvig Heiberg, P.M. Møller and H.L. Martensen was foundational for both his critical and aesthetical writings. In general, it seems that Kierkegaard developed a certain set of textual skills and tastes from his company with the Heibergs and the Heibergian circle, including his penchant for Hegel. See Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Indianapolis, 1990), passim but especially p. 50. For Kierkegaard's relation to Heiberg, see George Pattison, “Johan Ludvig Heiberg: Kierkegaard's Use of Heiberg as a Literary Critic,” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries: Literature, Drama, and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Bartley Stewart (Farnham, England, 2009), 169–87. For a discussion of Hegel in Denmark, see Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 2003), passim but specifically, 45–82; and Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge, 1998), 101–24. For a general perspective on P.M. Møller and Kierkegaard, see Peter Thielst, “Poul Martin Møller: Scattered Thoughts, Analysis of Affectation, Struggle with Nihilism,” in Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark* (New York, 2003), 45–61. For a general perspective on H. L. Martensen, see Kirmmse (1990), 169–197.

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<sup>5</sup> Those are respectively Søren Kierkegaard, *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer. Udgivet mod hans Villie* (1838), and Søren Kierkegaard, *En literair Anmeldelse. To Tidsaldre, Novelle af Forfatteren til "en Hverdags-Historie," udgiven af J. L. Heiberg* (1846).

<sup>6</sup> See Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, *The Corsair Affair: And Articles Related to the Writings* (Princeton, 1982), and Johnny Kondrup, "Meir Goldschmidt: The Cross-Eyed Hunchback," in Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries: Literature, Drama, and Aesthetics, Jon Stewart ed., (Farmham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 105–47.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Krisen og en Krise i en Skuespillerindes Liv," *Fædrelandet*, nr. 188-191, July 24–27, 1845.

<sup>8</sup> Richard M Summers, "Aesthetics, Ethics, and Reality: A Study of *From the Papers of One Still Living*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Early Polemical Writings*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia, 1999), 56. For Byron's legacy in Europe see Richard Cardwell ed., *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, 2 vols. (New York, 2004). For the Byronic hero, in general, see Peter L. Thorslev Jr., *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie, "Alfred Tennyson," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate* (Troy, NY, 1885), viii.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Byron's influence in Denmark, see Jørgen Erik Nielsen, "Look to the Baltic: Byron between Romanticism and Radicalism in Denmark," in *The Reception of Byron in Europe*, vol. 2, ed. Richard Cardwell (New York, 2004), 365–74.

<sup>11</sup> Nielsen (2004), 369.

<sup>12</sup> Nielsen (2004) points out two interesting examples of Golden Age thinking on this matter. Molbech "regarded familiarity with Byron's life and personality as crucial for full understanding of his poems." See page 367; and Grimur Thorgrímsson Thomsen (1820–96) published his dissertation *Om Lord Byron* and there Byron is regarded "as an eminently subjective poet, so that the poet's life is of crucial importance..." See page 369.

<sup>13</sup> Thorslev (1962), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Sven H. Rossel, "From Romanticism to Realism," in *A History of Danish Literature*, ed. Sven H. Rossel (Lincoln, NE, 1992), p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger, *Poetiske Skrifter*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1936), 20.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 181–82.

<sup>18</sup> Rossel (1992), 188.

<sup>19</sup> P. M. Mitchell, *A History of Danish Literature* (Copenhagen, 1957), 113.

<sup>20</sup> Even in Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig's 1808 *Nordic Mythology*, the Old Icelandic mythology is read as allegory in Grundtvig's exegetical idealism of finding the past, present, and future of the Christian ethos prefigured in the Eddas and Sagas of the late medieval period.

<sup>21</sup> Rossel (1992), 203.

<sup>22</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Julespøg og Nytaarsløier: Comødie* (Copenhagen, 1836), 126–129.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell (1957), 135–37.

<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1987), 30.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell (1957), 136–40.

<sup>26</sup> Rossel (1992), 203.

<sup>27</sup> Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Nye Digte – 1841: Reformationskantaten 1839* (Borgen, Copenhagen, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Heiberg (1990), 129.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>30</sup> Klaus P. Mortensen, "Efterskrift og noter," in Heiberg (1990), 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Eggert Christopher Tryde, "Nye Digte af J.L. Heiberg. Copenhagen: Reitzels Forlag. 1841. 8. 249 S.," *Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. 1, nos. 2–3, (1841): 174.

<sup>33</sup> *Either/Or I* (1987), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>35</sup> Rossel (1992) 209–210.

<sup>36</sup> For an interesting discussion and definition of the Byronic hero see Thorslev (1962), 187-199.

<sup>37</sup> Lord Byron, *Manfred*, II, ii, 127–49.

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed folkloric and literary study of the Wandering Jew see George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Providence, R.I., 1965).

<sup>39</sup> For the Wandering Jew in Kierkegaard's writings see Joseph Ballan "The Wandering Jew: Kierkegaard and the Figuration of Death in Life," in Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2014), 235–248.

<sup>40</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Three discourses on Imagined Occasions* (Princeton, 1993), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent Newey, "Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold III and IV*," in B. G Beatty and Vincent Newey. *Byron and the Limits of Fiction* (Totowa, N.J., 1988), 148.

<sup>42</sup> For example, a four-part portrait of Byron appeared in *Nyt Aftenblade* spring of 1825. Cf. Jens Andersen, *Hans Christian Andersen A New Life*. (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2005) 1833. See also Rossel (1992 ), 209–210.

<sup>43</sup> Bartholomew Ryan, "Lord George Gordon Byron: Seduction, Defiance, and Despair in the Works of Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions: Literature, Drama and Music*, ed. Jon Bartley Stewart (Farnham, England, 2009), 1.

<sup>44</sup> These are all presented in Ryan (2004) and are summarized below. For Ryan, these references point to the demonic (*Manfred* and *Cain*) and to the seducer (*Don Juan*) in Byron's poetic corpus, as these were two figures that seduced themselves "into the religious realm of Kierkegaard's probing thought." (9) Bartholomew Ryan's article was extremely helpful for its clarity of source and outstanding for its thoughtful readings.

<sup>45</sup> *Either/Or I* (1987), 106.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

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<sup>49</sup> *Either/Or*, II (1987), 22.

<sup>50</sup> Lord Byron, "To Eliza," l. 16. This motif also seems globally present in Kierkegaard's *Repetition* (1843).

<sup>51</sup> *Either/Or*, II (1987), 41.

<sup>52</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton, 1980), 131.

<sup>53</sup> Ryan's analysis of Kierkegaard's thoughts on Shelley in relation to Byron and Kierkegaard's notion of silence are also very interesting. See Ryan (2009), 6. He makes a further correlation between this passage and the passage from *The Seducer's Diary* where Johannes cries out, "Let her hate me, scorn me, be indifferent to me, love someone else—I do not fear; but stir up the water, break the silence. To stare me this way is mean of you, you who nevertheless fancy yourself stronger than I." (*Either/Or*, I (1987), 327). Here we have strong intonations of Byron's Manfred/Ahasveras and we see that not only do the seducer and the poet, they have the power in Kierkegaard to break the silence, they are one and the same thing, the Byronic. For Kierkegaard this elevates the Byronic to only a limited degree; he can break the silence, but cannot of course ward it off.

<sup>54</sup> Ryan (2009), 3.

<sup>55</sup> *KJN*, 82: Sept. 2, 1836.

<sup>56</sup> *KJN*, 83: Sept. 2, 1836.

<sup>57</sup> *JP* (1978), 5160.

<sup>58</sup> *JP* (1972), 331. These lines are reminiscent of what E.J. Trelawny wrote upon examining Byron's corpse, that "few marble busts could have matched its stainless white, the harmony of its proportions, and perfect finish; yet he had been dissatisfied with that body, and longed to cast its slough. How often I had heard him curse it!...I asked Fletcher to bring me a glass of water. On his leaving the room, to confirm or remove my doubts as to the exact cause of his lameness, I uncovered the Pilgram's feet, and was answered—it was caused by the contraction of the back sinews, which the doctors call 'Tendon Achilles,' that prevented his heels resting on the ground, and compelled him to walk on the fore part of his feet, except this defect, his feet her perfect. This was a curse, chaining a proud and soaring spirit like his to the dull earth." He would later recant this



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hagiographic vision of Byron's body. See Norman Page, *Byron: Interviews and Recollections* (Macmillan, 1985), 167–68.

<sup>59</sup> See Frederick Shilstone, "Byron, Kierkegaard, and the Irony of 'Rotation,'" *Colby Quarterly* 25 (1989): 237–44, and Ryan (2009), 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Either/Or*, I (1987), 288.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Ryan (2009), 4–5.

<sup>63</sup> Rossel (1992) 238–39.

<sup>64</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II, ll. 347–48.

<sup>65</sup> "Annette" distills many tropes of Byrony that Kierkegaard found so enthralling in the early forties, but love and the erotic seem more pronounced in Kierkegaard's work considering Winther's relationship with the Byronic.

<sup>66</sup> Nathaniel Kramer, "Christian Winther: Kierkegaard as Lover and Reader," in Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries* (Farnham, England, 2009), 286.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Meir Aaron Goldschmidt, *Nord og Syd*, vol. 8, January 17, 1851, 41–56; and January 24, 1851, 73–91.

<sup>69</sup> Henning Fenger, "Kierkegaard – a Literary Approach," *Scandinavica* 3 (1964): 312.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce H. Kirmmse, "'Out With It!': The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge, 1988), 15–16.

<sup>71</sup> *Encounters With Kierkegaard: a Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, ed. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, 1996), 136.

<sup>72</sup> Page (1985), 178–79.

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