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Joakim Garff: Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography

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1813–1834

KIRKKEGAARD, Kirkegaard, Kiersgaard, Kjerkegaard, Kirckegaard, Kerkegaard, Kierckegaard, Kierkegaard.

The parish registers provide plenty of testimony that the name is a tricky and a volatile one. It of course has something to do with a churchyard [Danish: *kirkegaard*, “churchyard,” usually in the sense of “cemetery”], but not in the usual sense. The name in fact stems from a couple of farms located next to the church in the village of Sædding in the middle of the Jutland heath, about a dozen miles southeast of Ringkøbing. In common parlance the two farms were termed “churchyards” because of their close proximity to the church. Michael was born on one of these farms on December 12, 1756, the son of tenant farmer Peder Christensen Kierkegaard, who had taken his farm’s name as his surname in order to emphasize that this was where he and his family were from. In the beginning the normal spelling was simply “Kirkegaard,” but after a time it evolved into “Kierkegaard,” and this spelling perhaps contains a faint echo of how the name sounded in the dialect of Jutland.

Michael was the fourth child in a family that fourteen years later finally came to include nine children. The heath was a stingy provider and poverty gnawed at the family, so after several difficult years as a shepherd boy, eleven-year-old Michael left the farm of his forebears. In that district the west wind forces the trees to lean longingly toward the east, and Michael followed their lead. Accompanied by a sheep dealer from the town of Lem, he set out for the Copenhagen of King Christian VII, where his mother’s brother, Niels Andersen Seding, who had a dry-goods shop in a cellar on Østergade, took him on as an apprentice. At first Michael served as an errand boy, then as a shop assistant, and just before Christmas in 1780 he was granted his own business license and could then establish an independent firm. The surviving account books indicate that Kierkegaard’s selection of wares included lisle stockings, woven caps, leather gloves from the Jutland town of Randers, and various goods from Iceland, all of which he sold on short road trips to the northern Zealand towns of Hillerød and Elsinore. The energetic businessman must have learned how to spin gold from these fuzzy wares because by age twenty-nine he was able, with his business part-

ner Mads Røyen, to purchase the building at 31 Købmagergade. Røyen moved into the building, while Kierkegaard himself settled in number 43, where he opened his own business in “Glazier Clausen’s Cellar.”

Not only was his shop located partly underground but his methods were also a bit shady. The business had hardly got off the ground before the city’s silk and clothing merchants reported Kierkegaard and other wool dealers from Jutland to the master of their guild. The resulting raid on these businesses uncovered French linens and silk ribbons. Jutland wool dealers were not permitted to deal in such fine goods; therefore the master of the guild imposed severe fines upon the illegal importers. In turn the importers complained to the authorities that the legal regulations governing the trade had become so complex that no one could figure them out. The complaint hit its mark, and pursuant to a resolution of July 30, 1787, hosiers were permitted to trade in all sorts of cottage-industry woolen and linen goods, plus Danish felt and swanskin (a tightly woven, heavy flannel, teased only on one side). The following year Kierkegaard also received permission to trade in Chinese goods and West Indian wares: sugar, cane syrup, and coffee beans. Nonetheless, he pressed his case all the way to the Supreme Court, which found in his favor, and he was thereafter permitted to deal in such luxury articles as cottons and silks. The Jutland wool dealers had won the battle against the silken Copenhageners.

The economy was booming and Michael Kierkegaard was not one to miss an opportunity. He invested his money in various properties on Købmagergade, Peter Hvitfeldtsstræde, Kalveboderne, Sankt Pederstræde, Knabrostræde, and Helsingørgade; miraculously, he suffered no losses from the great fire which ravaged Copenhagen in 1795. The following year he inherited the estate of his mother’s well-to-do brother and bought a piece of property in Sædding on which he had a fine half-timbered home built for his elderly parents and three of his younger siblings, Karen, Sidsel Marie, and Peder. The house was made of oak and painted red, so everyone could see that Michael had done well, over there in the capital city. He himself never saw Sædding again, but he did correspond with his sister Else, who had been born the year he had left home.

During his first years in Copenhagen, Michael Kierkegaard’s circle of friends and associates consisted primarily of fellow immigrants from Jutland who were employed in the same field. It was therefore no surprise to anyone when Michael married Røyen’s sister, Kirstine Nielsdatter, on May 2, 1794. People thought it was about time, as Michael was by then thirty-eight years old and Kirstine only a year younger. With 568 rixdollars of her own money, Kirstine was a good match, but we have no idea how the two felt about one another—the registry of marriages merely listed the bare facts:

“Michael Peter Kiærsgaard, hosier, and Kirstine Røyen, copulated on May 2 in Holy Spirit Church.” The marriage was childless and lasted not quite two years. Kirstine died of pneumonia on March 23, 1796, and was buried in Assistens Cemetery three days later.

Less than a year later Michael entrusted his flourishing business to his cousin Michael Andersen Kierkegaard and to Christen Agerskov, a nephew of his former father-in-law. This decision caused general surprise among his colleagues and acquaintances, for although Michael had occasionally complained of various maladies, people thought it was just hypochondria as there was nothing physically wrong with him. But even if his motives for transferring his business are unknown, the move was part of a momentous episode in the life of the enterprising businessman: Heedless of all plan or principle, he had impregnated his serving maid, Ane Sørensdatter Lund, whom he consequently felt obliged to marry. Even though the ordinance, dating from 1724, that required a year of mourning before remarriage applied only to widows (widowers had to wait a mere three months), Kierkegaard’s blunder was more than an embarrassing mistake, it was a potentially costly one as well. The marriage contract he submitted to his attorney Andreas Hyllested on March 10, 1797, made it clear that the couple would *not* cohabit. In the event of the death of the husband, the widow would inherit the household goods and two hundred rixdollars a year and would also receive an inheritance of two thousand rixdollars to be set aside for any possible children. The document stated further: “Should the unexpected event transpire that the temperaments of the couple show themselves to be incompatible, and it may be granted us to live separately, my future wife will receive her wearing apparel and her linens; in addition to this I will give her a one-time payment of three hundred rixdollars for the purchase of necessary household goods as well as an annual payment of one hundred rixdollars as long as she lives.” It was further emphasized that should such an occasion arise, the children would reside with their father after attaining the age of three.

Attorney Hyllested refused to endorse the marriage contract. Not only were the husband’s economic circumstances so glaringly superior to the terms offered to the wife and children, but it was unusual for a marriage contract to contain so many detailed provisions concerning divorce *prior to* entering into the marriage that Kierkegaard was asked to submit a new and less niggardly version. Kierkegaard deferred to his attorney, and the new papers were signed, whereupon the somewhat perplexed serving girl, who was by then four months pregnant, could promise her lord eternal fidelity in a quiet home wedding that was recorded in the marriage registry book

with these affectionate words: “Widower Michael Kiersgaard, hosier, and Miss Ane Sørensd. Lund, copulated April 26 at Great Kiøbmagergade.”

Ane had been born June 18, 1768, as the youngest daughter of Maren Larsdatter and her husband Søren Jensen Lund, who was said to have been a “cheerful and jocular” man, from Brandlund in central Jutland. The family owned a cow and four sheep and were further endowed with two sons and four daughters, of whom the first was named Mette and the remaining three were named Ane, Ane, and Ane. This choice of names could give rise to some confusion, so the youngest was simply called “little Ane.” After she was confirmed she went off to Copenhagen to work as a servant in the home of her brother, Lars Sørensen Lund, who had married the widow of a distiller and was thus also wedded to a distillery situated on Landemærket in Copenhagen. The conditions there were so terrible, however, that Ane soon left to work instead for Mads Røyen, whose service she then left in 1794 to work in the household of the newly married Michael Kierkegaard. After this point, Ane does not seem to have had much connection with her own family. Although her brother Lars was one of the godparents when her first daughter was baptized, her second daughter’s baptismal party two years later was of a better class, and her brother the distiller was not among them. To judge from the scanty sources available, she was a pleasant, chubby little woman with an even and cheerful temperament. She appears to have been unable to write; when she signed public documents, someone had to guide her hand. Perhaps she could read a bit, but the reading matter she owned was not particularly demanding. Two of the very few volumes in her possession were Hagen’s *Historic Hymns and Rhymes for the Instruction of Children* and Lindberg’s *Zion’s Harp: A Christmas Present to the Christian Congregation*, containing hymns by Kingo, Brorson, Ingemann, Grundtvig, Lindberg himself, and others. Her unproblematic spirit has not inspired any literary or poetic portrayals and perhaps can only be glimpsed here and there in Søren Kierkegaard’s writings, where a housewife is depicted as a useful, quiet factotum in her husband’s home. In his journals, Søren Aabye did not mention her by name one single time, and he never dedicated to her anything he ever wrote—not even an edifying discourse.

Ane and Michael were thus in many respects an odd couple, but as time went on they probably learned to love one another. And at any rate they comported themselves like proper married folk. Three girls came along in the course of the first five years: Maren Kirstine on September 7, 1797; Nicoline Christine on October 25, 1799; and Petrea Severine (sharing a birthday with her eldest sister) on September 7, 1801. And when the paterfamilias wrote his will in 1802, he was far more generous than he had been at the time of the marriage contract. True, mention is still made of the

consequences of divorce (“which God forbid”), but were this to happen Ane was now guaranteed twice as much annually as previously, while if the husband were to die she would now inherit one-third of his fortune, with the remainder divided among the children. In that same year Kierkegaard bought two houses in Hillerød with his former brother-in-law Mads Røyen. The names of the properties give an idea of their proportions: Røyen took up residence in “Peter’s Castle,” while the Kierkegaard family moved into “The Palace Inn,” which had a splendid garden that inclined down to a lake. When the first boy, Peter Christian, came into the world on July 6, 1805, the family moved back to Copenhagen and settled into an apartment on Østergade, where Ane became pregnant with another son, Søren Michael, who was born March 23, 1807. Then, after Niels Andreas made his entrée on April 30, 1809, the family moved in the late summer of that year to a house on Nytorv located between the corner house at Frederiksberggade and the building that served both as a courthouse and as the city hall. The house at 2 Nytorv provided the backdrop for the Kierkegaard family for almost forty years. This was where they lived and died.

And this was where Søren Aabye Kierkegaard’s life had one of its many beginnings.

The Little Fork

Michael Kierkegaard was fifty-six and Ane was forty-five when their seventh child entered the world on Wednesday, May 5, 1813, so it was a well-experienced married couple who held their late-born child over the baptismal font on Thursday, June 3, at a private baptismal service in Holy Spirit Church. The family pastor, resident curate J.E.G. Bull, blessed the former serving girl’s youngest son and baptized him Søren Aabye Kierkegaard—Søren, just like his mother’s merry father, and Aabye after a recently deceased distant relative whose widow, Abelone Aabye, was a member of the baptismal party.

Michael, a merchant, could look back upon some turbulent years. King Frederick VI had joined Napoleon in a doomed alliance against the English, who bombarded Copenhagen mercilessly in September 1807 and transformed large areas near Nytorv into ghost towns. In October of the same year, the English sailed out of the harbor with the captured Danish fleet, and an era in the history of Danish trade and navigation ended. The country was short of money, so Finance Minister Ernst Schimmelmann set the printing presses at full speed, putting into circulation more and more banknotes for which there was no backing. Exactly four months before Søren Aabye’s

birth, the government decided that the so-called currency notes, which could be redeemed for hard silver, would be replaced by notes issued by the National Bank, worth only one-sixth of the face value of the original notes. State bankruptcy had arrived. Shares, mortgages, promissory notes, and other financial paper served as little more than proof of the bankruptcy of those who held them. And between 1814 (when Denmark was forced to cede Norway) and 1820, 248 firms in Copenhagen went broke, an average of about a firm every week.

The so-called royal obligations were the only financial instruments that escaped the drastic devaluation, and this was precisely where Michael Kierkegaard had placed his money. He had entrusted the management of his business to others, but he had not turned his back on the world of finance. In 1808, as part of a patriotic fund drive, Kierkegaard and his relatives paid out of their own pockets for the construction of a gunboat, and when his cousin Anders Andersen Kierkegaard's silk and textile firm, Kierkegaard, Aabye, and Co. went bankrupt in 1820, Michael undertook extensive damage control, writing off no less than eleven thousand rixdollars of debt owed him by the firm.

Although he was still described as a stocking dealer, hosier, or merely shopkeeper (sometimes with the prefix "former") in the parish registries of baptism and confirmation, when he himself signed up for communion he advanced socially and termed himself "merchant." Thanks to the economic catastrophe, he had become one of the richest men in the country. A generation later his youngest son took comic and self-conscious consolation in the circumstance that he had come into the world in this paradoxical fashion: "I was born in 1813, the year of bankruptcy, when so many other worthless notes were put in circulation. There is something of greatness about me, but because of the bad economic conditions, I don't amount to much. And a banknote of this sort sometimes becomes a family's misfortune."

When he was born, Søren Aabye had three sisters aged sixteen, thirteen, and eleven, and three brothers aged seven, five, and four. Three of each sex was nice symmetry, and their double names added a peaceful sort of harmony. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard broke the equilibrium: As the conclusion to the flock of seven children he seems to have been as unplanned as the manner in which it all began. Nor was he an easy boy to deal with. Indeed, according to his second and third cousins he was a rather mischievous little fellow whose company was better avoided. One of these cousins thus described him as "a frightfully spoiled and naughty boy who always hung on his mother's apron strings," while another noted laconically that "as usual, Søren sat in a corner and sulked." At home he bore the nickname "the fork," because that was the utensil he had named when he had been asked

what he would most like to be: “A fork,” the freckled little boy had answered. “Why?” “Well, then I could ‘spear’ anything I wanted on the dinner table.” “But what if we come after you?” “Then I’ll spear you.” And the name “the fork” stuck to him because of “his precocious tendency to make satirical remarks.”

The Kierkegaard family was struck by two great misfortunes, which probably had the unintended consequence of encouraging special treatment for the youngest child, who was given a number of the sort of privileges that children are seldom slow to turn to their own advantage. On September 14, 1819, Søren Michael, only twelve years old, died at Vartov Hospital of a brain hemorrhage caused by a collision with another boy in the schoolyard. And on March 15, 1822, Maren Kirstine died at age twenty-four. To judge from the obituary her grieving parents published in the *Adresseavisen*, however, it appears that her death was not entirely unexpected: “We will not fail to announce herewith to our family and friends that on the fifteenth of this month it has pleased God, by means of a quiet and peaceful death, to call home to His heavenly Kingdom our eldest daughter, Maren Kirstine, in the twenty-fifth year of her life, after fourteen years of illness.” Maren Kirstine, who had been the result of the merchant Kierkegaard’s terrible blunder, had thus been sick no fewer than fourteen years before she departed with a “quiet and peaceful death”—which, incidentally, cannot have been entirely peaceful inasmuch as the cause of death given on the burial certificate was “convulsions.”

She was buried on March 21 in the family plot outside the city at Assistens Cemetery where her younger brother already lay. The two children were given a common gravestone of flat, reddish sandstone, which was placed in front of the vertical monument that Michael Kierkegaard had placed on the grave of his first wife, Kirstine Nielsdatter Røyen, engraved with the dates of her birth and death in December 1798. On the gravestone for the two children, however, the birth and death dates were given only for Maren Kirstine, which was scarcely the result of mere forgetfulness. Rather, it is more likely that Michael Kierkegaard wished to have his family grave serve as a sort of public confession so that everyone could see that the pious merchant’s daughter had been born less than a year and a half after the departure of Kirstine Nielsdatter Røyen, and that he had thus begotten the child a mere nine months after his first wife’s death.

Sickness and death burdened the spirits of a household in which there were few diversions in any event. Toys were seen as superfluous, and Søren Aabye had to make do with his mother’s yarn spindle as his only toy. Outside on the market square, on the other hand, there was plenty of activity. On market days the windows of the family house looked out on farmers

with wagons full of grain and freshly slaughtered beef, taking up their positions among the women from nearby Valby, who hawked their live and fluttering poultry in hoarse voices. On the king's birthday, golden apples danced in the jets of water in the fountain on Gammeltorv, and that was certainly worth a different sort of gander. On the first Thursday in March, the king rolled up in his golden carriage to preside, along with the nation's most eminent jurists, over the opening of the Supreme Court. The whole pageant was like a fairy tale. When the festivities were over, a group of shabby, destitute people from the poorhouse swept the square and the adjacent streets with their brooms of dark brown twigs.

Sunday was the day of rest, when one went to church. Until 1820, the family's pastor and confessor was J.E.G. Bull of Holy Spirit Church, who had baptized most of the Kierkegaard children and had confirmed the family's three daughters. The liturgical ordinance of 1685 required that everyone who wished to take communion must sign up in "the book provided for this purpose" a day or two in advance, so that the pastor could turn away the unworthy and the sexton could obtain the appropriate quantity of bread and wine. These communion registers from the period 1805–1820 reveal when Michael Kierkegaard and his wife went to confession and took communion. In general people took communion only three or four times a year, and the Kierkegaard family always chose to do this on Fridays. The couple also followed the pietistic custom of taking communion during Lent and in connection with days of special importance for the family—for example, as close as possible to Ane's and Michael's birthdays, June 18 and December 12, respectively.

Bull preached the Gospel in plain language, placing special emphasis on the ethical side of Christianity, and no less a man than the great poet Adam Oehlenschläger himself termed Bull a "very worthy and good person." At some point during the early summer of 1820, however, Michael Kierkegaard abandoned Bull for Jakob Peter Mynster, who had been appointed first resident curate at the Church of Our Lady in 1811 but had had to do his preaching in Trinity Church because the Church of Our Lady had lain in ruins since the English bombardment and was not reconsecrated until Pentecost Sunday in 1829. The most likely explanation for Michael's sudden switch to Mynster is that Mynster had become the preacher favored by the day's intellectuals and the better class of people. Mynster remained Kierkegaard's confessor until the end of 1828, when Mynster was transferred to the Palace Church and could therefore no longer serve as a confessor at Trinity Church. Mynster did, however, remain the family's preferred pastor, and his religious writings and published sermons were read in the family home. In fact Michael once promised Søren Aabye a rixdollar if he would read one of Mynster's sermons aloud, and four rixdollars if he would

write out from memory the sermon he had heard that morning in church, but Søren Aabye found this dishonorable and resolutely refused to do it.

The Kierkegaard family home was steeped in religious notions typical of humble folk, and these could not be exorcised by Mynster's sermons. These notions included the belief that a randomly chosen Bible verse could *really* give one an anything-but-random nod from Divine Governance concerning coming events and pressing obligations; similarly, anniversaries of birth and death dates were linked to calamities of one sort or another. On one occasion, when Søren Aabye had chanced to turn over a saltcellar at the dinner table, his father became furious and called him a prodigal son and other frightful things. Søren Aabye did his best to defend himself, pointing out that when Nicoline Christine had broken a valuable tureen, nothing had been said at all. But his father replied that in that case it had not been necessary to say anything, because the tureen was so very valuable that the seriousness of the unfortunate situation was obvious. Søren Aabye accepted the explanation, and many years later he concluded his retrospective consideration of the incident with these words: "There is something of the greatness of antiquity in this little story." But in fact this interpretation of the story is not merely rather overly dramatic, it also rests on erroneous suppositions: Søren Aabye's father stormed and raged over the upset saltcellar because according to popular superstition spilling salt meant loss of money!

Similarly distant from the Christianity represented by Mynster was the Moravian Congregation of Brethren, whose meetinghouse was on Stormgade, where on Sunday afternoons the Kierkegaard family regularly gathered with the so-called *Gehülfen* [German: "those who have been helped"]. The religious group had been founded in 1739, inspired by the imaginative organizational genius Count Zinzendorf, who established the Herrnhut colony on his estate Berthelsdorf in Saxony. The group was supposed to actualize Christianity as a "religion of the heart" and to serve as missionaries of this understanding of the faith. The heart was not to be crushed under the consciousness of sin that the Law had awakened; no, the heart was to be melted, and this could only be done by preaching the Gospel of Christ, the Savior and Redeemer. The Moravian Congregation was not a part of the State Church but had its own New Testament understanding of what a congregation was. This made the congregation's ecclesiastical politics rather complicated and also led to its persecution by the government and the clergy. Since 1773 the Copenhagen congregation had had its spiritual center in the tiny southern Jutland village of Christiansfeld, whose well-made products (including its still-famous honey cakes) were sold in Copenhagen. During the first decades of the nineteenth century the Copenhagen Moravian Congregation had experienced such an increase in attendance that it had been necessary to rebuild the meeting hall to accommodate no

fewer than six hundred souls. Michael Kierkegaard was charged with a leading role in accomplishing this task, and in so doing he was able to erect a quite tangible memorial to his lifelong relationship with Moravianism.

Reading a sermon on the passion of Christ delivered by curate Peter Saxtorp gives us an impression of the atmosphere in that simply furnished meeting hall where opponents of the period's dominant theological rationalism met with other like-minded believers in order to worship God in passionate earnestness. Saxtorp, who had been Michael Kierkegaard's pastor until 1795, was closely connected to the Moravian Congregation, and his sermon's preoccupation with Jesus' blood and wounds was more or less the epitome of Moravianism: "They spat in Christ's face, o, a frightful insult! We wretched earthworms view it as a great injury and as ill-treatment if someone merely spits *at* us. And here they are not merely spitting at Jesus or on His clothing, but they spat right in His face. O, how great this insult was! How pitiable the blessed face of Jesus looked! Especially since His hands were bound, and He could not wipe off this uncleanness. Truly, we have here an astonishing sight: God's own Son, Who is the splendor of His Father's glory and the express image of His being, standing with His face full of spit, that face which in days of yore had shone like the sun on Mount Tabor." Somber images of this sort from the Moravian Congregation seized hold of the sensitive child's imagination quite early and set their stamp on his view of life.

In summertime the great miracle took place: The children were sent up north for a vacation at the home of Mads Røyen, where they stayed at "Peter's Castle" and played from morning till night. On July 26, 1829, the father wrote to his eldest son: "As usual, Søren is spending his summers in Frederiksborg." Many years later, in July 1838, Søren Kierkegaard would again stand beside that substantial house, with the forest in the background, suddenly recalling how he had run to and fro, clad in a green jacket and gray trousers—and now he could no longer catch up with that carefree child. He continued: "Viewing one's childhood is like viewing a beautiful landscape when one is driven through it facing backwards: One only becomes truly aware of the beauty of it at the moment, the very instant, that it begins to disappear."

Warping

When, as a grown man, Kierkegaard looked back upon little Søren Aabye in order to understand himself and the course of his life, the factual story and the concrete circumstances rarely interested him. Rather, the dramatic

or archetypal narrative dominated his vision—the scenography itself, the symbolic episodes. His was a literary memory, as subjective as it was selective, a memory that decided exactly what it would recall and how it would do so. It is thus pretty much impossible to determine where the factual story ends and the fictive narrative takes over. The manner in which Kierkegaard's father is portrayed provides a very telling example of this: At some points he looms up with a power that Old Testament patriarchs would be hard put to compete with; sometimes, he is seen to possess an almost supernatural imagination compared to which all the world's fairy tales seem flat and prosaic, and the most beautiful woodlands wither and fade. But the actual Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard? Even though Kierkegaard's journals and published writings seem to tell us almost too much, we have no idea what he was really like.

If we limit ourselves to the relatively modest collection of source materials, we get a picture of a strict and very particular man who demanded of those around him a degree of obedience, thrift, and attentiveness to detail that bordered on the insufferable. One of his servants tells us that “the old man was very exacting with respect to the polishing of shoes and boots: There were not to be any dull spots, not a single grain of sand.” As the servant continues his narrative we can almost sense him quivering: “He was not to be trifled with when he became angry. Not that he shouted or used abusive language, but the seriousness with which his reproaches were uttered made them sink in more deeply than if he had made a scene. At most, even when his words were harshest, the queue at the back of his neck might shake in a curious fashion.” The grown-up Søren Aabye once remarked, “My father was born on the due date,” noting that his father wished to be so punctual and prepared in every respect that he would buy the bread for a dinner party fourteen days before the guests arrived! Despite his notorious wealth, he clung to the Jutland ideal of simplicity. The children were clothed modestly, indeed frugally—especially the girls, who early on had to accustom themselves to waiting upon their younger, more-educated brothers. Michael Kierkegaard himself owned a fine frock coat (a “porcelain” coat); he would have the collar turned when it became worn, but not a moment before. His conservatism led him to show extraordinary reverence for everything connected with rank and distinction, and it was said that he had double respect for his friend Boesen, “both for the man and for the Councillor of Justice.” For long periods he was engaged in the study of the German philosopher Christian Wolff, particularly his *Reasonable Thoughts concerning the Powers and the Proper Employment of the Human Understanding in Order to Know Truth, Imparted to Lovers of the Truth*. And despite his lack of formal education he could be razor-sharp when he intervened incisively in

the academic debates of his well-educated sons. “The most gifted person I have met,” Peter Christian later deemed him, while the theologian Frederik Hammerich called him “wonderfully gifted” and provided this description: “The old Jutland hosier was a man who was always reading. He could work his way through philosophical systems but nonetheless made the family’s daily purchases at the market himself. I can still see him on his way home from the market, carrying a fine, fat goose.” His granddaughter Henriette Lund vividly recalled “the aged, venerable figure of Grandfather in a long beige coat, his trousers stuffed into the tops of his narrow boots, a sturdy cane with a gold head in his hand, and, not least interesting to us children, his pockets filled with *pfeffernüsse*. His build was powerful, his features firm and determined; he carried his head bent slightly forward, while his eyes had an expression as if they were dreaming, still staring out over the moors of Jutland.” When he showed himself in the street he usually wore a “gray coat, a vest or tunic, velvet or Manchester cotton knee breeches in black or white, coarse wool or silk stockings, shoes with large buckles or Hungarian boots with tassels on the front.” Here, as in most other cases, we have a portrait of the merchant Kierkegaard seen very much *from without* and devoid of any sort of psychological depth. Our interest in Michael Kierkegaard, however, is of course to get an idea of the mental possibilities, the patterns of behavior, the dispositions that might also have been lurking in his son.

It is incontestable that it is to his youngest son that the father is indebted for his formidable posthumous reputation. For example, from the period when *Either/Or* was nearing completion, we have a partially autobiographical sketch, entitled *De omnibus dubitandum est*, in which a young gentleman named Johannes Climacus offers a broadbrush and generously immodest sketch of his own intellectual development. At one point in this “narrative,” as the excursus is called, he provides a picture of his childhood home that is so carefully and succinctly drawn that the passage has since become a must in every biography: “His home did not offer many diversions, and since he almost never left the house, he early on became accustomed to occupying himself with himself and with his own thoughts. His father was a very strict man who was to all appearances dry and prosaic, but his homespun coat concealed a glowing imagination that not even his advanced age could dampen. When Johannes occasionally asked for permission to go out, he was most often refused, although one time his father made up for it by offering to take him by the hand and stroll up and down the floor. At first glance this was a poor substitute, but like the homespun coat it concealed something quite different underneath. Johannes accepted the offer, and it was entirely up to him to decide where they would walk. They went out

the city gates to a nearby country palace, or down to the seashore, or here and there on the city streets, wherever Johannes wished, because his father was capable of everything. While they walked up and down the floor, his father described everything they saw: They greeted passersby; carriages rumbled past them, drowning out his father's voice; the fruits that the pastry women were selling were more tempting than ever. He related everything so exactly, so vividly, with such immediacy, down to the least detail. . . . For Johannes it was as though the world were being created during their conversation, as if his father was Our Lord and that he himself was the Lord's favorite, who was permitted to contribute his own foolish whims as merrily as he liked—because he was never rebuffed, his father was never annoyed, and everything was included and always to Johannes's satisfaction.”

There is a loving, almost lyrical lightness in this literary flourish in which Kierkegaard—for the time being—was able to hold the traumatic experiences of his childhood at arm's length. An invisible hand has erased every troublesome element and has caused every voice other than the father's and the son's to fall silent. One quickly forgets that this episode took place only “one time,” just as one quickly comes to identify Johannes with Søren Aabye, so that the scene silently slips into the parlor of the house at 2 Nytorv. After that, it does not take long until the episode is counted as a biographical fact—which it is *only* to the extent that any narrative also narrates something about its narrator. Behind the image of the father's walking-in-place at home in the parlor one catches a glimpse of a very resolute man who wants his son to achieve *intellectually* the success he himself has had *financially*. Indeed, as an adult Søren Aabye could recall—and agree with!—his father's insistence, repeated “thousands of times,” that if one really wished to make something of oneself as an author one should “write in one of the European languages” and not in the hole-in-corner tongue known as Danish.

It is only when Kierkegaard, as an adult, takes us step-by-step down a long, narrow staircase into the inner courtyard of his childhood that we learn that this idyllic, pastel-toned version of the Kierkegaard home was a poetic fiction. “Alas, it is frightful,” he wrote in the autumn of 1848, “when even for a single moment I think of the dark background of my life, right from its very earliest beginning. The anxiety with which my father filled my soul, his own frightful melancholia [Danish: *tungsind*, ‘heaviness of spirit’], the many things of this sort that I cannot even write down. I felt such an anxiety about Christianity, and yet I felt myself so powerfully drawn toward it.” Displaying the sort of emotional ambivalence and misunderstood loyalty that brings to mind the paradoxical devotedness of incest victims, Kierkegaard usually takes us into his confidence only as a parenthetical

aside in passages that emphasize that his father was the best and most loving of fathers—as in this journal entry from June 9, 1847, where the parentheses are quite literally present: “(Merciful God, alas, how my father, in his melancholia, has wronged me quite terribly—an old man places the entire burden of his melancholia on a poor child, to say nothing of what was even more dreadful, and yet, for all that, he was the best of fathers.)” An undated entry a bit later in the same journal: “Here is the difficulty of my own life. I was raised by an old man in an enormously strict Christianity; therefore my life seems terribly confused to me; therefore I have been brought into collisions that no one thinks about, much less talks about.” The following year, when the son composed the manuscript of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, the relationship was given its official literary form: “As a child I was strictly and seriously raised in Christianity—humanly speaking, raised insanely. Even in earliest childhood I overtaxed myself with notions placed upon me by the melancholy old man, himself already crushed by them—a child quite insanely disguised as a melancholy old man. Frightful! No wonder, then, that there were times when Christianity seemed to me the most inhuman sort of cruelty, although I never abandoned my veneration for it, even when I was furthest from it. I was firmly convinced—especially if I myself did not choose to become a Christian—never to initiate anyone into the difficulties with which I was familiar and which I never saw discussed, either in conversation or in writing.” The following year the journals contain this anticipation of Freud: “It is frightful to see the thoughtlessness, indifference, and self-confidence with which children are brought up. And yet every person is essentially what he will become by the time he is ten years old. And yet you will find that almost all bear damage from their childhood that they cannot overcome even when they attain the age of seventy. And every unfortunate idiosyncrasy tends to stem from some erroneous impression received in childhood. O, what a sad joke on the human race—Governance has equipped almost every child so generously because Governance could foresee what was in store for the child: to be brought up by ‘parents,’ that is, to be warped and bungled to the greatest extent humanly possible.”

Kierkegaard certainly knew what he was talking about, but for the time being he didn’t talk about what he knew. We search his journals in vain for concrete details of his father’s overweening assaults, but this does not mean that they have simply disappeared from the story. Indeed, the contrary is true: Through his traumatic assaults, the father endowed the boy with a fund of artistic capital that the son managed brilliantly, investing it in his *pseudonymous writings*. So if we want him to surrender his secrets—the grue-

some ones and the less gruesome ones—we are thus directed to examine these writings, suspiciously and unremittingly, once again.

Søren Sock

“I arrived at school, was presented to the teacher, and then I received my assignment for the next day, the first ten lines of Balle’s catechism, which I was to learn by heart. Every other impression was now banished from my mind; only this task stood vividly before it. As a child I had an extremely good memory, and I quickly finished my assignment. My sister heard me recite it several times and assured me that I had learned it. I went to bed, and before I fell asleep I recited it to myself one more time. I fell asleep with the firm intention of reading it over again the next morning. I woke up at five o’clock in the morning, got dressed, took hold of my catechism and read it again. It is all still as vivid to me right now as if it happened yesterday. It seemed to me that heaven and earth would collapse if I didn’t do my homework, and at the same time it seemed to me that even if heaven and earth collapsed, that catastrophe would in no way exempt me from what I had been assigned to do—my homework. . . . It was owing to my father’s earnestness that this incident made such an impression on me, and even if I owed him nothing else, this would be enough to make me eternally indebted to him. This is what matters in raising a child, not that the child learns one or another specific thing, but that the spirit is matured, that energy is aroused.”

The story of this good little pupil who learns the first ten lines of Bishop Balle’s catechism by heart is from the second part of *Either/Or*, in which Judge William uses this example to instruct the distracted aesthete about the importance of duty. And since Kierkegaard was just as taciturn concerning his school years as Judge William was talkative, it is no surprise that people have—once again—fallen for the temptation to close their eyes to the historical facts and have transformed Søren Aabye into the main character in William’s poetic tale. Reality, however, was far more prosaic.

In 1821, when Søren Aabye had completed the necessary preliminary instruction and was enrolled in the Borgerdyd [Danish: “civic virtue”] School, Niels Andreas was also a pupil at the school but in a much higher grade, and Peter Christian was about to become a university student. Thus the teachers were familiar with the name Kierkegaard, and thanks to Peter Christian’s impressive performance they probably had rather great expectations. The school, situated on the second floor of publisher Søren Gylden-

dal's venerable building in Klareboderne, had been founded in 1787 by the Society for Civic Virtue in order to provide the upper bourgeoisie a more practical-oriented alternative to the School of Our Lady, the Latin grammar school better known as the Metropolitan School. Very quickly, however, the School of Civic Virtue developed into a regular Latin school, and thanks to the autocratic Michael Nielsen, who was the headmaster from 1813 to 1844, the school earned a reputation of being one of the finest in the country. This reputation was in no small measure the result of iron discipline; indeed, the headmaster's motto was "Every boy who walks through Klareboderne should tremble."

Like the merchant Kierkegaard, Headmaster Nielsen was a Jutlander and was in every respect a man of the old school. Like many of his colleagues he was a titular professor in his field, and there can be no doubt about his qualifications as a Latinist. Opinions concerning his pedagogical talents were less flattering, however, and Kierkegaard's schoolmates seem to be more or less in agreement on this. For example, F. L. Liebenberg, who subsequently became a literary scholar and an editor, remembered Headmaster Nielsen's "barbaric strictness," and N.C.L. Abrahams, who became a professor of French literature, called him a "tyrant and pedant," while Pastor Edvard Anger described him as a "despot," adding that Nielsen "only taught us to obey, to remain silent in the face of the most outrageous injustice, and to write Latin compositions." And for Orla Lehmann, who entered the university three years before Kierkegaard and who subsequently became a popular liberal politician, the headmaster was nothing but "a peasant boy who had battled his way through adversity and had attained a respectable position more by dint of strenuous work than of any exceptional intellectual gifts. He bore the unmistakable stamp of that past, not merely in his coarse personality, but also in his notions of education, which had more to do with chastisement than with encouragement, and were more concerned with compelling respect than with inspiring us."

When the pupils showed up at nine in the morning, Nielsen walked through each of the classrooms, punishing tardiness with his specialty, called a "double head-slap" (first with the back of the hand, then with the open palm of the hand), accompanying this with abusive terms such as "scoundrel" and "jackass." Punctuality was literally drummed into the children. Transgressions were noted in the class's demerit book and were punished with detention; caning was Nielsen's punishment for more serious offenses. In the normal course of events, he kept the students under control by frequently uttering "sinde, sinde," which is Jutlandic for "keep still, keep still." The only time discipline was relaxed was during thunderstorms, because on these occasions Nielsen himself would become fearful, folding his hands

and saying, “When God speaks, I keep silent”; immediately thereafter, however, he would add, “But when I speak, you keep silent.” In addition to Latin exercises, Nielsen also enjoyed other exercises of the more physical sort, including deep knee bends, and he is said to have been reasonably competent at stickball, a game he played with his students on the common in a nearby park. When the fun was over the heavyset man and his skinny pupils took a shower together.

“My old headmaster was a demigod, a man of iron! Woe, woe to the boy who could not answer Yes or No to a direct question,” Kierkegaard later wrote. But Kierkegaard also detected a certain sensitivity deep within the iron headmaster, and in 1843 he sent Nielsen a copy of *Three Edifying Discourses* with the following dedication, “The excellent leader of the Borgerdyd School, the unforgettable teacher of my youth, the admired paradigm of my later years.” Similarly, a letter to Nielsen dated May 6, 1844, was signed “In gratitude and affection, your entirely devoted S. Kierkegaard.” But even as early as the very first of Kierkegaard’s letters—dated March 8, 1829, and addressed to Peter Christian, then in Berlin—Søren Aabye depicted with touching solicitude how Nielsen was suffering with a bad leg that prevented him from carrying out his daily instructional duties. The pupils had to report to his office to recite their lessons, after which Nielsen assigned them “so many Latin compositions that in the end he himself was unable to sort them out.” A foot injury incurred while extinguishing a fire in one of the school’s wood stoves only made Nielsen’s condition worse, but eventually he was again able to teach in Søren Aabye’s class, where he limped in every day, wearing “one slipper and one boot.”

We have quite good testimony about what sort of schoolboy Søren Aabye was. In the 1870s, H. P. Barfod, the first editor of Kierkegaard’s posthumous papers, contacted several former schoolmates of Søren Kierkegaard, who had by then become so famous, and asked them to write down their recollections of him. Of course, we must take their memories, by then close to half a century old, with many grains of salt, but certain traits recur so frequently that they begin to resemble what might cautiously be called facts. With few exceptions, virtually everyone emphasized that Søren Aabye was a tease. Those who were a bit more psychologically sophisticated associated his teasing with his slight build and his strange dress, which left him exposed and vulnerable, inviting the teasing that he tried to defend against by being a tease himself. In accordance with his father’s taste, Søren Aabye wore an outfit of coarse black tweed with a short-tailed jacket. But his wardrobe must also have included other items, because a niece would later recount that when her uncle was a boy he “ran about in a jacket the color of red cabbage.” And the trousers were cut unusually short,

leading to all sorts of cheap jokes. “I remember very well, from my childhood on,” Kierkegaard wrote a generation later, “how much it saddened me to have to have such short trousers, and I remember my brother-in-law [Johan] Christian’s unending witticisms.” And when the other boys were permitted to wear boots, Søren Aabye had to put up with shoes and thick wool stockings from his father’s shop. This led to the nickname Søren Sock, but they also called him “the choirboy” because his appearance called to mind the black-clad choirboys who sang in the church schools.

Søren Aabye was not only a tease, he was also a smart aleck. Once, when L. C. Müller, who taught religion and Hebrew, reprimanded him, Søren Aabye burst into high-pitched laughter. Müller buttoned up his jacket and indignantly exclaimed, “Either you leave or I will.” After a moment’s consideration Søren Aabye replied, “Well, then, it’s best that I leave,” whereupon he left the classroom. Søren Aabye was no less naughty with J. F. Storck, who taught Danish language and literature. For Storck, who was engaged to a young woman named Charlotte Lund, Søren Aabye wrote a composition titled “Charlottenlund: The Trip There and the Amusements to Be Had There” [Charlottenlund: a popular wooded park and amusement center, just north of Copenhagen]. There had been free choice of topic, as a test of maturity. With Professor Boy Mathiessen, who, despite the fact that he taught German, was a weak sort of person, the foolishness really got out of hand one day. When Mathiessen entered the classroom, he was shocked to see the pupils sitting around a well-laid table, complete with sandwiches and beer! Bon appétit! But when Mathiessen was about to report the scandalous conduct to the headmaster everyone thronged around him, apologizing and promising better behavior—excepting one. Søren Aabye merely said: “Will you also tell the Professor [Nielsen] that we are always like this in your class?” Whereupon Mathiessen entirely abandoned his intention of reporting them and returned to his desk in resignation.

Quiet, strange, joyless, cowed, withdrawn, thin, and pale—these are some of the adjectives of introversion that recur in the recollections of former pupils and are contradicted (but also psychologically supported) by more extroverted terms such as teasing, witty, impudent, irritating, and provocative.

Søren Sock was absolutely no wunderkind. “No one knew anything about his *unusual* talents,” wrote P. E. Lind. “His responses in religion class were like those of many other students, and his Danish compositions were no better (though probably more detailed) than those of other good students. His teacher, Bindsbøll, . . . claimed that one of his compositions had been plagiarized from Mynster’s sermons.” And that was probably the case. Certainly he was capable, always the second- or third-best in the class, but

never first; that honor was reserved for Anger, who remembered Bindesbøll's comment from their last year at school: "Kierkegaard is really annoying, because he is ready with an answer before he has got the question." With the pettiness of a valedictorian, Anger also recalled how Søren Aabye, from early on, had shown a special talent for cheating—or "peeking," as they called it in school—particularly in the subjects of history and geography.

This cheating was also recalled by F. P. Welding (a baker's son and the fat boy in the class), who according to the headmaster's account was extraordinarily phlegmatic and mediocre. Of all the pupils, Welding, who later became archdeacon at Viborg Cathedral, had the best memory and gave the most detailed report. Welding remembered Søren Aabye as an odd sort of boy from a strict, strange home that was shrouded in an oppressive darkness. Welding continued: "He was a skinny boy, always on the run, and he could never keep from giving free rein to his whimsy and from teasing others, using nicknames he had heard, or laughter, or funny faces, even though this often earned him a serious beating. I do not recall that his language was ever genuinely witty or cutting, but it was annoying and provocative, and he was aware that it had this effect even though he was often the one who had to pay for it. These outbursts of his passion for teasing seemed to be absolutely unconnected with the rest of his otherwise silent and unspoken existence among us, with the withdrawn and introverted character he displayed the rest of the time. During these outbursts his most remarkable talent was the ability to make his target appear ridiculous, and it was especially the big, tall, and powerfully built boys he chose as the objects of his derision. . . . As a boy, he did not bear the least trace of the great poetic gifts he later developed. Now and then, when our classmate, H. P. Holst, would read us his attempts at poetry or a Danish composition, Søren Kierkegaard was always one of the first to interrupt his reading by throwing a book at his head."

The school day did not exactly summon up glorious poetry: It started at nine in the morning and lasted until seven in the evening, with a break from one to three o'clock so that pupils could go home to a bowl of buckwheat porridge or similar fare. There was no school on Wednesday afternoons. After the preparatory year there were six grades, which were counted backwards, starting with the sixth and ending with the first. The two highest grades each lasted two years, and when the disciples had matured sufficiently, they matriculated into the university in the month of September and were subjected to entrance examinations by the professors there. In the higher grades, there were forty-five hours of instruction each week, comprising two hours of Danish, two of French, two of German, three of religion,

three of Hebrew, three of mathematics, five of history, six of Greek, six of composition, and thirteen of Latin. When Søren Aabye went up for his matriculation examinations in Latin he was responsible for more than 11,000 lines of poetry and 1,250 pages of prose. It goes without saying that there was plenty of work to be done, and because Søren Aabye pulled his weight he was rewarded, as the years went by, with the honor of helping Headmaster Nielsen in correcting the Latin compositions of the other pupils. The required curriculum in Greek was not as extensive, but still quite considerable: almost 10,000 lines of poetry and more than 300 pages of prose—plus the Gospel of John! Søren Aabye's Greek teacher was Peter Christian, and Welding recalled the way in which Søren Aabye "made things difficult on various occasions by bringing his relationship to his brother into the classroom situation." The required curriculum in Hebrew was the whole of Genesis and fifteen chapters of Exodus. We have no details regarding any of the other subjects excepting the titles of the textbooks used, from which we may surely conclude that the pupils had to know them by heart. With only two hours of French each week, the pupils could scarcely have accomplished much more than attain reasonable competence in reading. Kierkegaard did quite well, though in later years he would read Pascal in German translation. English language and literature had not yet become a school subject, although a "man by the name of Asp," who had written an entire book entitled *Tightening the Requirements for the Matriculation Examinations*, was busy with plans to institute obligatory instruction in spoken and written English, which "would be extremely unpleasant for me," a fearful Søren Aabye wrote to Peter Christian in a letter of March 25, 1829. He got off with only a scare, however, so in later years he had to make do with Shakespeare in German "because I myself don't read English."

Two Weddings and a Fire

While Søren Aabye was working his way through the mountain of books, his sisters Nicoline Christine and Petrea Severine had spent their time falling in love. The sisters' chosen beaux were the brothers Johan Christian and Henrik Ferdinand Lund, a textile dealer and a bank employee, respectively. It must have pleased Michael Kierkegaard to see that his daughters had chosen husbands whose line of work reflected his own interests, the textile trade and finance. But for Peter Christian, Niels Andreas, and Søren Aabye, it was the Lunds' middle brother, Peter Wilhelm Lund, who was of greatest interest. He had also received his schooling at the Borgerdyd School, had entered the university four years before Peter Christian, had studied medi-

cine and natural history, and had written two first-prize academic essays in one year, the first concerning the circulatory systems of ten-legged crustaceans, the other reporting on the results of the most recent vivisection research. This was in 1824, when Peter Wilhelm was only twenty-three years old. The following year he journeyed to Brazil, where he spent three years researching meteorological, biological, and zoological topics for the Scientific Society and regularly sent home collections of exotic insects and unusual birds for the Royal Museum of Natural History. By April 1829, when the globe-trotter finally found himself once again within the ramparts of Copenhagen, he had not only garnered an enormous experience of the world, but also amassed a unique assemblage of natural history research material, which he described in a series of essays that ran the gamut from the biology of the Brazilian giant ant to the early developmental stages of the pectinibranchian snails to the physiology of the intestinal tracts of the *Euphones* genus of finches.

An event that occurred in the interval between the two weddings—Nicoline Christine’s in 1824 and Petrea Severine’s in 1828—served as a dramatic reminder of the impermanence of all things. Peter Christian noted the details of the event in his diary: “April 2, 1826, fire broke out in the Kalisch house—ours was greatly damaged.” A fire had broken out that night at a chemical laboratory, part of a pharmacy in Frederiksberggade that shared a courtyard with the Kierkegaard home. The alarm sounded at 1:15 in the morning but by the time the fire company arrived the pharmacy was completely engulfed in flames, and people were afraid it was the start of another huge fire in the city. The residents of the neighboring houses, including the Kierkegaards, had fled into the streets half-naked while curious onlookers flocked to the scene—indeed, even King Frederick VI himself felt obligated to rise from his royal bed and witness the events. The city got off with nothing more than a bad scare, though the Kierkegaard house was damaged and some of Peter Christian’s papers were lost. There is no record of how the twelve-year-old Søren Aabye reacted, but it is possible that this was the source of his subsequent and well-known pyrophobia.

A couple of weeks after the fire Peter Christian turned in a splendid performance at the university examinations for his theological degree, which was all the more remarkable because his total period of study had been a mere three and one-half years. In his letter of recommendation for Peter Christian, Professor Jens Møller called him “one of the most excellent minds at our university,” and indeed, the professor averred, he had never before encountered a young man who could “debate with such perspicacity, presence of mind, and elegance, as he has done on so many occasions.” Peter Christian spent a well-earned summer vacation in Vesterborg on the

island of Lolland, staying at the home of Bishop P. O. Boisen, a Grundtvigian. Peter Christian was good friends with Boisen's sons, also theologians; nor did Boisen's twenty-year-old daughter, Elise Marie, escape the young graduate's notice. Eline Boisen, who was seven years younger, observed the advances of their summer guest, describing with a peculiarly hesitant precision the irony with which the intellectual always attempted to shield himself when confronted by too much unabashed sensuality: "He loved her earnestly, and yet a day never went by when he did not offend her grossly, as if to defy her, to put her to the test, or whatever it was."

Peter Christian's stay was abruptly broken off in mid-July, however, when he became seriously ill with typhus. His fever reached dangerous heights and he lay close to death, but by the latter part of the summer he had recovered sufficiently to begin studying philosophy: "drowned in Kantianism," his diary reports. During the following year he continued his studies, with Hume and Spinoza on the agenda, but he also found time to take "a great many journeys on foot," and in the summer of 1827 he made his first journey to Jutland, where he climbed Himmelbjerget and visited Århus.

After returning home he applied for a resident fellowship at Borch's College but he was turned down, and a surprising journal entry from late December informs us that he had "begun to learn how to fence." His fourteen-year-old little brother was busy with his confirmation lessons. The big day was Sunday, April 20, 1828, when Søren Aabye was number twenty in a group of forty-eight boys whom Mynster blessed in Trinity Church. Søren Aabye's proficiency earned him the grade of "very good," which was nothing to brag about, but Peter Christian nonetheless presented him with his pocket watch, while he himself received their father's watch. After writing the name of the last boy in the parish registry of confirmations, the sexton wrote across the entire page, "Here Ends Doctor Mynster's Period of Service at the Church of Our Lady." The events of slightly less than a generation later would make these words strangely prophetic.

After serving as an opponent at his friend Johannes Ferdinand Fenger's public defense of his dissertation in May 1828, Peter Christian and Johannes Ferdinand embarked on a lengthy grand tour that took them to Berlin, where they attended lectures by Hegel and Schleiermacher, among others. The following year Peter Christian continued on to the university in Göttingen, where he defended a philosophy dissertation on lying—*De notione atque turpitudine mendacii* [Latin: "On the idea and the moral baseness of lying"]—and the dialectical aplomb he displayed on that occasion earned him the nickname "Der Disputierteufel aus Norden" [German: "The devilish debater from Scandinavia"].

There was, however, one person whom the devilish debater could not vanquish, namely his father back home, whose letters functioned as a sort of remote control over his son, on whom he implacably imposed his will. These letters are among the few surviving from the father's hand, and one scans them in vain for signs of the fertile imagination for which he has been praised. What is striking, however, is his strictness in matters concerning money. When Peter Christian was in Berlin he received, enclosed with a letter of credit to a certain "Herrn H. F. Klettwig," a letter from his father giving him detailed instructions about how he was to comport himself in redeeming the letter of credit: He was to send off the letter of credit "in the first post" and include "a very polite letter" in which he informs Klettwig that he will be arriving in Göttingen "in mid-October," which according to his father's calculations meant that Peter Christian must leave Berlin "at the end of August" and embark upon "a journey on foot," wherefore he must remember ahead of time to forward his "luggage, properly packed and secured, via parcel post." Nothing was to be left to chance, much less to Peter Christian's own judgment. "Finally, request that he acknowledge by the next post the receipt of your letter, beg his pardon repeatedly for troubling him, and write your name and your address clearly at the bottom of the letter." As a sort of reward, Peter was promised a "note for 20 or 25 *louis d'or*," but here again he was cautioned not to expend more than half of this sum before his arrival in Göttingen. After all these practical matters, the father then turned to the pending matter of the evaluation of his son's dissertation. He had heard that Andreas Gottlob Rudelbach found himself in a "completely impossible" situation. In other respects Rudelbach was phenomenally capable, one of the most erudite men of his generation, but he had Grundtvigian leanings and was therefore in ill odor in conservative circles. So if Peter Christian were to let his dissertation be judged by Rudelbach, it could certainly damage his future academic career, and his father suggested the German theologian F.A.G. Tholuck instead, "if it does not seem too much to ask of him; in that case you could shorten your journey, and after an appropriate stay in Halle you could proceed directly to Göttingen."

Peter Christian obeyed the paternal decrees and traveled to Göttingen, but scarcely had he arrived before he received yet another officious epistle from his father. The letter began with the complaint that his son had caused the family "no little amazement" by neglecting to congratulate his sister Petrea Severine on her birthday. The letter went on to provide a detailed discussion of a long "rainy spell" and its negative influence on the harvest and possible effect on "the price of seed." The father again asked about the dissertation. He had already heard from Rudelbach's sisters to the effect that

Peter Christian had visited their brother, but he had been unable to learn whether Rudelbach had managed to read the dissertation, and he wished Peter Christian to inform him about this without delay.

When the father had finished writing this letter he had Søren Aabye make a copy of it in the “copy book.” While this was going on they were interrupted by an unexpected visitor, and Søren Aabye seized the opportunity to write, at the bottom of the letter, “I (Søren) will soon write to you in order, among other things, to refute Father.” Søren Aabye did not manage to write immediately, but it is easy to see what he wanted to protest. In the letter he had been set to copy so painstakingly he had read something concerning himself: “I don’t know how things are with Søren. I cannot induce him to write to you. Is it intellectual poverty, so that he cannot think of anything to write? Or childish vanity, so that he is unwilling to write anything for which he cannot expect to be praised, and, since he is unsure of himself in this respect, he would thus prefer to write nothing at all?” It was not pleasant for Søren Aabye to enter these lines in the copy book, but in fact Peter Christian also thought that Søren Aabye was being “childish” during this period. Indeed, Peter Christian wrote to his brother-in-law Henrik Ferdinand Lund: “The fact that Søren is not growing is just as inconceivable to me as the fact that he does not write—or rather, the latter is explained by the former.”

Apparently, to write is to grow.

Studiosus Severinus

Peter Christian reached Paris in the summer of 1830. The political situation was strained to the bursting point, and revolution suddenly became a bloody reality. His diary reports a firefight on July 28, when “a passerby with a knowing smile put two musket balls in my fist” for use during the coming battle. Back home, the family feared the worst, but Peter Christian escaped from the country and returned home unscathed, carrying his German doctoral diploma in his baggage.

And while the fall of the Bourbon regime was touching off rebellions all over Europe, Søren Aabye’s school days were coming to an end. His mother was concerned about how everything would turn out: “The young man is a bit too free and easy about it,” as she put it. But when he became a university student in October 1830, he had top marks (*laudabilis*) [Latin: “praiseworthy”] in all subjects and did exceptionally well (*laudabilis præ ceteris*) [Latin: “outstanding”] in Danish composition, Greek, history, and French. Headmaster Nielsen penned the following “school report”: “A

good mind, open to everything that requires first-rate attention, but for a long time he was very childish and quite lacking in seriousness. He had a desire for freedom and independence that was expressed in his behavior in the form of a good-natured, sometimes amusing lack of constraint, which prevented him from getting too involved with anything or from showing any greater interest in things than would keep him from being able to withdraw into himself again. His irresponsibility rarely permitted him to bring his good intentions to fruition or to pursue a definite goal in a sustained manner. When, in time, this trait diminishes, allowing his character to take on more seriousness—and recognizable progress has been made in this direction in the past year—and his fine intellectual abilities are able to develop more freely and unconstrainedly at the university, he will certainly be among the more capable students and in many ways will come to resemble his oldest brother.” The comparison with Peter Christian was intended as praise, but it was certainly an irritant to Søren Aabye as well.

In the Latin “school testimony” that was to accompany the gifted pupil to the university, Nielsen repeated the comparison and also provided a portrait of the esteemed father: “This man’s wisdom and piety can be seen in all of his circumstances, and especially in child rearing, from which he [the father] himself derived great benefit in the cultivation of his mind and in intellectual enjoyment. Because the father’s home is thus such a model of industriousness, patience, and moderation, and is arranged in conformity with the principles by which children are trained in civic virtue and in God-given wisdom, he has enjoined his son to view all things in the light of the fear of God and a sense of duty, and to seek the source of all things in God as the fount of all wisdom. He has taught him, on the one hand, that God does not listen to the prayers of do-nothings, and on the other hand, that without prayer, acumen can achieve nothing except to ensnare the mind in error.” And then, at last, Nielsen turned his attention to the son: “This young man, who has thus been raised and educated in this manner, in keeping with the customs of our forebears and with the discipline that will promote the welfare of the state and good morals—and not in the rash and rebellious spirit of the times—and who possesses many qualities that make him well-liked and win him friends, I recommend to your attention, learned men, in the highest fashion.”

If we place the two testimonials side by side, we could almost believe that they do not describe the same person. The one document emphasizes the intellect, the unseriousness, the irresponsibility, the hilarity, and the cleverness, while the other document only speaks of upbringing, God-fearing devotion, responsibility, and a sense of duty. But Nielsen surely had a sense of what lurked inside his student.

Included with the examination certificate was a “Certificate of Matriculation into the University” issued to Severinus Aabye Kierkegaard; it was written in Latin and personally signed by university rector J. W. Hornemann. Four days later, on November 4, 1830, yet another document arrived, this one bearing a blood-red seal at the bottom. This was a “Certificate of Discharge on Grounds of Unsuitability,” in which the head of the Royal Life Guard, Johan Heinrich Hegermann-Lindencrone, attested that after three days in the guard and pursuant to a physician’s evaluation as well as to his “own request,” Kierkegaard had been declared unfit for service and his name had therefore been stricken from “the Guard’s roll.” Three days as a “member of the Seventh Company of His Majesty the King’s Life Guard” had apparently been plenty for Søren Aabye, who in later years likewise refused to be pressured to join ranks and march in step with everyone else.

We can get a little glimpse into the domestic life of the Kierkegaard home during this period by reading the letters sent by the Rudelbach sisters, Juliane and Christiane, to their brother Andreas, who in 1828 had accepted a clerical post in the small industrial town of Glauchau in Saxony. Juliane and Christiane supported themselves by teaching at a school for young ladies, but they were also an inspired pair of energetic, spinsterish gossipmongers who would have fit in perfectly with today’s tabloid press. They were regular callers at number 2 Nytorv, from which they reported on the great and the petty events of daily life. “They are blessed, Christian-spirited, honest, and upright old folks” was their assessment of Mr. and Mrs. Kierkegaard, whose “goodness and charity,” as well as their generous table, with “wine and cakes” they praised quite audibly. Two days after Søren Aabye’s eighteenth birthday, Juliane, who usually did most of the writing, sent her brother the following sketch of the general atmosphere, which also reveals a typically romantic soft spot for the newly graduated “doctor”: “We spent the evening in their company, and the party also included their daughter and son-in-law. I found the Doctor much more handsome than the first time I saw him, and he is certainly a worthy and godly young man. At the table it pleased me to hear him cut his somewhat conceited brother and—I dare say—stupid brother-in-law down to size for their arrogant and dull remarks. But he did it with so much good nature and gentleness that the brother-in-law, at least, never even understood him.”

The stupid brother-in-law was surely Johan Christian Lund. And as time passed, the conceited brother was getting something to be conceited about.

Alma Mater

After the matriculation examinations, which were administered at the university and called the “first examination,” there awaited the “second examination,” formidably titled the “*examen philologico-philosophicum*.” This examination was subdivided into two parts: the linguistic portion, which Søren Aabye passed on April 25, 1831, receiving *laudabilis* in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and history, and *laudabilis præ ceteris* in elementary mathematics; and the philosophical portion, which Søren Aabye took on October 27 of that year, receiving four splendid *præs* in theoretical and practical philosophy, physics, and higher mathematics. It was not written in the stars that Søren Aabye would study theology, but if one bears in mind the important place of religion in the family home, it was more or less in the cards.

During this period the theology faculty left a lot to be desired and was pretty close to meriting a failing grade. The corps of professors consisted of the superannuated Jens Møller, of whom it has fittingly been said that he was less a “producer of original work than a reproducer of the work of others, but as such he was incomparable”; the slightly anonymous M. H. Hohlenberg, who was in charge of instruction in Hebrew; and finally H. N. Clausen, the only point of intellectual light, an effective administrator who served for a number of years as rector of the university and was well liked by the students. Like most of his colleagues, Clausen was a rationalist, but he had followed Schleiermacher’s lectures in Berlin and was now attempting to unify Schleiermacher’s more emotionally tinged concept of faith with a critical view of ecclesiastical tradition.

During the first years, Søren Aabye was a reasonably energetic student, and a look at the surviving participant lists for theology and philosophy lectures allows us to track the progress of his studies. We do not know which lectures he attended during his first two semesters, but in the winter semester (November 1–March 31) of 1832–33 his name appears on the participant lists for Clausen’s lectures on the synoptic Gospels. During the summer semester (May 1–September 30) of 1833 he attended Clausen’s lectures on New Testament hermeneutics and Hohlenberg’s lecture series on Genesis and Isaiah. The participant lists for the winter semester of 1833–34 are missing, but from Søren Aabye’s notes it can be seen that he followed Clausen’s interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles and recently appointed Professor C. T. Engelstoff’s lectures on the Gospel of John. It is likely that during this semester and the subsequent one he followed Clausen’s exposition of the first and second portions of his dogmatics. During the following

semesters he devoted himself to several books of the New Testament, writing commentaries on them and translating them into Latin, the language in which students were examined in the exegetical subjects. But at some point during the winter semester of 1835–36 he apparently had had enough. His translation of the epistle of James remains a fragment, and the pages in the notebooks in which this university student was supposed to have written his own commentaries are yawningly empty. And in a journal entry dated May 1, 1835, Kierkegaard asked himself whether “the enormous mass of interpreters has on the whole done more harm than good to the understanding of the New Testament.”

Typical of his relationship with the university was the following little incident which his university friend Peter Rørdam reported to his brother Hans in a letter of December 4, 1834. When it was time to begin using the new university auditorium, members of the theology faculty requested that the students sit in assigned, numbered seats throughout the semester, so that they could more easily keep track of each student’s participation in the course. As might be expected, this suggestion gave rise to protests from those students who (presumably) were less regular in attendance and who of course did not want to put up with such a humiliating arrangement. Peter Rørdam wrote to his brother, who was living out in the country in Harboør, that “the younger Kierkegaard” had particularly distinguished himself in this connection with his “sober but serious opposition,” with the result that “nothing further will be done, and the old arrangement will continue.” So a person could continue to skip classes with a reasonably clear conscience!

Søren Aabye’s conduct outside the university does not seem to have been quite so sober. True, he paid for private tutoring by H. L. Martensen, who had passed his theological examinations in 1832 with the very high grade of *laudabilis & quidem egregie* [Latin: “praiseworthy and indeed exceptional”] and who led Kierkegaard through the main points of Schleiermacher’s dogmatics, but the tutoring does not seem to have had the desired effect because, as Martensen recalled more than a generation later, “Søren Kierkegaard had his own way of arranging his tutoring. He did not follow any set syllabus, but only asked that I lecture to him and converse with him. I chose to lecture to him on the main points of Schleiermacher’s dogmatics and then discuss them. I recognized immediately that his was not an ordinary intellect but that he also had an irresistible urge to sophistry, to hair-splitting games, which showed itself at every opportunity and was often tiresome. I recollect in particular that it surfaced when we examined the doctrine of divine election, where there is, so to speak, an open door for sophists. In

other respects he was quite devoted to me at that time.” Later on, this devotion would be very hard to detect, but at the beginning the relationship seems to have been reasonably positive for both parties. In a letter of November 15, 1836, Kierkegaard’s friend Emil Boesen wrote to Martin Hammerich that Kierkegaard had been at Martensen’s and “thinks well of him,” even if it did not please him that he apparently had to “permit himself to be instructed in whatever Martensen wishes to talk about with him.” Nor was it likely that the strong-willed student was pleased with the characteristic that Boesen attributed to his tutor Martensen in this same letter, namely that he was “dignified.”

If the tutoring was unsuccessful and the notebooks contained fewer and fewer notes, the cause was not laziness but a sharper sense of the profoundly radical nature of Christianity. “Christianity or becoming a Christian is like every radical cure: One puts it off as long as possible,” Kierkegaard wrote in a journal entry of October 9, 1835. And from this remark it is not so far to a sense of indignation that is so violent that the sentence charged with expressing it almost breaks apart at the center: “When I look upon the many and varied examples of the Christian life, it seems to me that instead of giving them strength, Christianity—indeed, that Christianity has deprived such people of their manhood, and that in comparison to the pagans they are like a gelding compared to a stallion.” We catch ourselves falling into a strange anachronism, asking whether Kierkegaard might have read Nietzsche, who a half-century later would raise precisely this charge against Christianity for having castrated the strongest individuals of the human race and bound the will to life in the fetters of morality. Kierkegaard rages on in another journal entry, also from October 1835: “In addition, there is also the strange, suffocating atmosphere we encounter in Christianity. . . . As soon as we look upon this earthly life, they come forth and declare that everything, both man and nature, is sinful; they speak of the broad path as opposed to the narrow. . . . Almost everywhere the Christian concerns himself with what is to come, it is punishment, devastation, ruin, eternal torment and suffering that are held out before him. And as voluptuous and profligate as the Christian’s imagination is in this respect, when there is talk of the bliss of the faithful and the elect, it is thin stuff, depicted as the beatific gazing of lusterless, staring eyes with large, fixed pupils or with a gaze so awash with moisture as to hinder all clear vision.”

For a theological student who was soon supposed to present himself for his final examinations, these lines were more than inappropriate. It is easy to understand how the ever-glib Martensen had his difficulties with the rebellious student Kierkegaard. We more than sense the need for rebellion,

the desperation over the supposed sinfulness of everything, the disgust with the endless meting out of punishments in his father's house and with the notion of the hereafter, of bliss, as a region to which admission is reserved solely for tidy castrati in confirmation suits.

Underground Copenhagen

Kierkegaard was not alone in turning violently away from somber pietism and dead orthodoxy. A somewhat similar reaction could be found in many places as a part of the period's various godly awakening movements, which were in turn connected with phenomena as various as the Danish peasant reforms, the ideals of equality and freedom that stemmed from the French Revolution, and the romantic era's notion of a person's inalienable right of self-determination. Composed of roughly equal portions of reaction (back to true Lutheranism) and revolution (down with the power of the clergy as a ruling class in society), the godly awakenings were a threat to the State Church. So attempts were made to stifle the movement by imposing fines and imprisonment, but this only served to strengthen its solidarity. Viewed politically, the godly awakenings were thus not unimportant in the development of modern democracy.

When the spirit came upon common workers like Ole Svane or Rasmus Klink, or when it seized hold of farmers like Kristen Madsen or Peder Larsen Skræppenborg, the authorities had the means to repress the religious movement. It was much more difficult to stop the charismatic and fearless polemicist Jakob Christian Lindberg, who was one of Denmark's most learned men, fantastically diligent, famous throughout Europe as an orientalist with expertise in Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, and Coptic but also in possession of such varied credentials as a degree in theology, a magister degree in Phoenician epigraphy, acknowledged talents as a numismatist, and an adjunct position at the Metropolitan School, and was a Bible translator, in later years a member of Parliament, and last (but not least) an ardent Grundtvigian—indeed, almost more Grundtvigian than Grundtvig himself, who sometimes had to put a damper on his zealous disciple. Pietists, old-fashioned Lutherans, members of the Jutland revival movement, followers of the Norwegian revivalist Hauge, and members of many other lay religious movements sought counsel and support from Lindberg, who traveled around the country protecting them from scorn and persecution. The same H. N. Clausen whom Grundtvig had attacked was also targeted by Lindberg, and this could have legal consequences, as was the case in 1829, when Lindberg published a pamphlet titled *Is Dr. H. N. Clausen, Professor of Theology, an Honest Christian*

Teacher in the Christian Church? With its trembling emotion, the very title itself resounds with typical Lindbergian indignation.

“It is a shame that we, who are in agreement with Lindberg with respect to the substance of the matter, are unable to extend a fraternal hand to him because of the manner in which he fights for the truth,” said Bishop Mynster, who was himself critical of the rationalists, their utilitarian morality, and their shallow eudaemonistic philosophy. What offended and worried Mynster, however, was something more than the *manner* in which Lindberg battled for the truth. As a declared antirationalist, Lindberg wanted to break with the State Church, and he therefore held religious meetings at his residence, “Little Serenity,” which lay just outside of Copenhagen near the Østerbro lime kiln. Despite the name of the place, the scene out at Little Serenity was anything but serene. After attending a sermon the day after Christmas in 1831, the two Rudelbach sisters, quivering with virtuous indignation, took up their pen: “The day after Christmas, Lindberg preached on the text from the Gospel, and since it is the only required text of the entire Church year that deals with the martyrs, he seized the opportunity and preached an extraordinarily stern and blunt sermon in which he loudly and publicly proclaimed that at present there is not a single pastor in the entire *Danish State Church*, *not a single one*, who, like Saint Stephen, would step forth and do battle for his Lord and Savior *now*, when it is most needed. He was extremely emotional, and the entire assembly, including himself, was very moved.”

As time went by it appeared that Lindberg wanted to incite underground Copenhagen to rebellion, and he became one the most derided figures in the middle-class daily press. Almost every newspaper published slanderous ditties or smear articles in which Lindberg was depicted as underhanded, poisonous, demagogic, fanatic, sophistic, and similar lovely things. *Kjøbenhavnsposten* actually had a regular column titled “Contributions to Knowledge about Magister Lindberg,” which carried the piquant intelligence that Lindberg and his assembly resembled “an old wound on a frail body, from which oozed so much poisonous and stinking venom that it infects the air.” The newspapers were also kind enough to inform the public that his “religious assemblies were frequented by prostitutes.” Lindberg could hardly show himself on the street without being met with jeers or with depictions of himself in the form of the Devil, and out at the Deer Park amusement park there was a peep show in which the Prince of Darkness was exhibited under the name “Magister Lindberg.” There were also rumors that he was to be incarcerated and executed on Christiansø, a notorious prison island. “None of the enemies of Christianity have awakened so

much offense as this Lindberg,” wrote the aging Bishop Mynster, who had witnessed an ungodly number of troublemakers during his term of office.

Grundtvig condemned the persecution of the adherents of the godly awakening movement, and as an opponent of rationalism he himself also wished to break free of the State Church and form his own congregation. As time went by, not a few of those who had earlier attended the meetings of the Moravian Congregation on Stormgade went over to Grundtvig’s vespers services at Frederik’s German Church and subsequently became members of Grundtvig’s congregation at Vartov Church. For a time, the merchant Kierkegaard felt tempted to move in this direction, and he subscribed to the *Theological Monthly*, in which the Grundtvigians set forth their critique of rationalism. Hans Brøchner is probably correct in his conviction that it was his “inner experience of religious *life*” that prompted the elder Kierkegaard (“whose religious persuasion was pretty much old-fashioned pietism”) to sympathize with Grundtvig and Lindberg.

Mynster was something close to the epitome of the State Church and pulled in the opposite direction, so in the course of the spring of 1831 the conflict came to a head: Grundtvig had collected the signatures of eighty male heads of households, and when he had collected one hundred he was going to go to the king and request permission to withdraw from the State Church and form an independent congregation. Kierkegaard, a wealthy merchant, was asked to add his name to the list but he hesitated and finally refused. A while earlier he had given a similar refusal to a group of zealots who had been taking up a collection on behalf of Lindberg, who became involved in one costly legal case after another, had been fired from the Metropolitan School in 1830, and therefore had scarcely a cent to his name. The elder Kierkegaard’s refusal to support the antirationalist cause on two separate occasions could not pass unnoticed, and Juliane Rudelbach, a dyed-in-the-wool Lindbergian and a tattletale, sent in her report directly from Copenhagen ground zero: “It has amazed me and a number of other people that old Kierkegaard has totally refused to lend public support to this congregation, claiming that he cannot or does not dare to do so, because he has two sons who are university students, who must obtain positions [in the State Church]. Lindberg believes that the Kierkegaards are certainly not un-Christian people, but that they are among those who come to the Lord at night. He also believes this about young Kierkegaard [Peter Christian], particularly in view of the fact that he hasn’t resumed his acquaintance with Grundtvig, . . . nor does he come to see Lindberg.”

As always, Juliane Rudelbach was well-informed, but she was mistaken when she assumed that the elder Kierkegaard cited his concerns about his two sons’ ecclesiastical or academic careers as only a pretext for his refusal,

because that concern was without doubt a fundamental and persistent motive for merchant Kierkegaard's religious moves. To be *for* Grundtvig (not to mention to be *for* Lindberg) was synonymous with being *against* Mynster, who as the royal confessor and as a member of the supervisory board of the university had an awful lot to say about the placement of theological graduates. Peter Christian also seems to have moderated his Grundtvigian sympathies, but only for a time. Then he published an article in the *Scandinavian Church Times*, edited by Lindberg. Mynster got wind of Peter Christian's relapse and gave him an earful because the article was too Grundtvigian in tone. Nonetheless, Peter Christian maintained his affiliation with the heretical group and set to work on a scholarly dissertation on Grundtvigian theology, *De theologia vere christiana* [Latin: "On truly Christian theology"], with which he ultimately (albeit after indescribable torment) earned the degree of licentiat in theology in 1836. In a letter to his brother, dated February 23, 1836, Peter Rørdam wrote that Peter Christian's dissertation "was just barely accepted" for defense, but that on the other hand, when it came to the oral arguments, which lasted "from ten in the morning until nine in the evening," Peter Christian showed that he had been "able to hold his own"—indeed, that he had actually played "toss-in-a-blanket with the faculty." Because the university building was still in ruins as a result of the English bombardment, the defense took place in the chapel of Regensen College, located in the wing of Regensen that faces the Round Tower. In a letter dated February 2, 1836, to Pastor Gunni Busck, Grundtvig expressed his delight that the learned men in "Regensen Church," which was "packed from morning till evening," were not only compelled to accept "a dissertation about building the whole of theology upon the [Grundtvigian theory of the] Ecclesiastical Word," but they had had to look on while Grundtvig's anathematized work *The Church's Rejoinder* was cited. Peter Christian made history that day, but we must search his diary all the way up to 1840 before we encounter his final breakthrough as a Grundtvigian, and it almost sounds like a sigh: "May 28, Ascension Day, Communion in Vartov."

There is no evidence that Søren Aabye ever heard Lindberg preach, but it is hardly daring to assume that Peter Christian—who according to the Rudelbach sisters has been "present at '[Little] Serenity' at the sermon by Lindberg that I mentioned"—discussed the sermon and related theological issues with his little brother, whose own enthusiasm for Grundtvig seems to have begun to cool down quite early. The Grundtvigian pastor Vilhelm Birkedal recounted that during his university years he met Søren Aabye when he had called upon Peter Christian, who was serving as his private tutor in moral philosophy. "He [Søren Aabye] liked to sit in the next room and read," wrote Birkedal, who also recalled having taken an impromptu

walk out to the customs office with the younger brother, who expressed his disapproval of Peter Christian's fascination with Grundtvigianism, which in his view was more likely to strengthen than to combat "all this nonsense about Christianity with which we are surrounded." Birkedal remembered this remark as having been made in "the thirties," so this critique stems from a very early period. This corroborates the negative pronouncements encountered in Søren's journals from this period. The first of these entries, dated May 28, 1835, bears the neatly written caption "Some Notes concerning Grundtvig's Theory of the Church." Its several pages contain detailed discussions of the arguments in *The Church's Rejoinder*, published by Grundtvig in 1825 in protest against the rationalist H. N. Clausen and his "exegetical popery." Kierkegaard also read and commented on Grundtvig's *Christian Sermons or the Sunday Book*, but here again his comments are critical, and the journal entry for Sunday, August 26, 1839, expresses irritation: "All of Grundtvig's sermons are really nothing but an endlessly repeated excursion of the imagination, so that one's legs can never keep up, a weekly evacuation." On that Sunday Grundtvig had preached at Vartov Church, where, despite their profound differences, Mynster had granted him a post earlier that year. Reporting in his memoirs on his tactics, Mynster explained: "I was of the not unfounded opinion that without a position he would create even more disturbances." And Mynster was certainly right about that.

After their solicitations had been flatly refused, neither Grundtvig nor Lindberg continued to call at the home on Nytorv, but Søren Aabye maintained his connection to Lindberg for a remarkably long time. Thus in September 1841, after Lindberg had moved out to 5 Allégade in Frederiksberg, Søren Aabye was invited there for a farewell party in honor of Peter Rørdam. Lindberg's daughter Elise later recalled how that evening "Søren Kjerkegaard" had "been very lively and had talked a lot." He had apparently been in good spirits. Four years and half a writing career later, he reverted to Lindberg's ideas in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here, in the middle of a half-critical, half-satirical discussion of Grundtvig's view of the church and the Bible, Lindberg emerges from the abyss of nonsense as the refreshing exception within the Grundtvigian movement. Lindberg, who in 1844 had been appointed parish pastor in Tingsted on the island of Falster, is praised as the "shrewd, dialectical Mag. Lindberg," and is honored for having put Grundtvig's "matchless discovery" into the form it required, so that it became "less discontinuous, less matchless, more accessible to sound common sense." Kierkegaard was definitely not uncritical of Lindberg, but even his choice of adjectives demonstrated clearly that the man commanded his respect. Lindberg is described as a "experienced dialectician" and "a shrewd

head,” who could “push a matter to its logical conclusion.” Indeed, Lindberg was “a man of so many remarkable talents” that “as an ally he is a great advantage, and as an opponent he can always make the battle difficult—but also enjoyable, because he is such an experienced fencer.” Kierkegaard was not one to bandy about superlatives lightly, so his praise of Lindberg was not simply hot air but was heartfelt and not without cost to Kierkegaard himself. This line, in particular, must have been profoundly irritating for Mynster to read: “I have never been able to detect anything sophisticated in the manner in which Lindberg argues.” In Mynster’s view it was precisely *the manner* in which Lindberg battled for the truth that made him so intractable—it was altogether too wild, too direct, too radical.

In that respect it was almost indistinguishable from Søren Aabye Kierkegaard’s one-man revolution of 1854–55.

The Black Sheep

“Søren does not seem to be studying for his examinations *at all* now. May God help him find a good way out of all this inner ferment and to the salvation of his soul.” Peter Christian confided this thought to his diary in March 1835, and for once his worries were fully justified. It goes without saying that the reason for the stagnation of his younger brother’s studies was that the university lectures were deadly dull, but an inspection of Peter Christian’s diary entries from this period also makes it clear that the situation in the family was not particularly conducive to scholarly work.

It began with Niels Andreas. Like his brothers, he wanted to study at the university, but his father had other plans. The merchant removed Niels Andreas from the Borgerdyd School and apprenticed him to his son-in-law, the silk and textile dealer Johan Christian Lund, who had married Nicoline Christine in 1824 and who was supposed to teach Niels Andreas about the business world. Niels Andreas probably opposed this radical intervention in his life, but his father was implacable, and that was that as far as the young man’s future was concerned. He moved out of the family home on Nytorv just after his fifteenth birthday. He traveled to Hamburg a couple of times with Christian Agerskov in order to establish some business connections there, but he was about as unlucky as his father, in his day, had been lucky. After returning home he was stationed in Agerskov’s “Fashion and Drapery Business” at the corner of Købmagergade and Klareboderne, but he found it unbearable, and there were serious conflicts with the rest of his family, especially his father. His reputation as a “jolly party fellow” probably did not make the situation with his family any better. “His father forced him to

stand behind a counter in a shop,” his friend Peter Munthe Bruun wrote angrily, adding that the family simply treated him like a “black sheep.”

Nor was Niels Andreas a part of the family group in the Church of Our Lady when Mr. and Mrs. Kierkegaard, together with their sons Peter Christian and Søren Aabye, received communion on July 6, 1832. Precisely a month later, on Monday, August 6, he ordered a copy of his birth certificate, which was a required document if one wished to apply for a passport. On Friday, August 17, he received communion alone; in the communion register the sexton wrote “Mr. Niels Andreas Kierkegaard, Clerk.” The following Wednesday, August 22, he read a little advertisement in the *Adresseavisen*, informing the public that in the course of the next week Captain Isaac S. Gibbs intended to sail from Copenhagen to “Boston in North America, for which voyage he is accepting freight and passengers.” Twenty-three-year-old Niels Andreas was no longer in doubt. He wanted to go to America, the sooner, the better. The official version was that he wanted to seek his fortune. In all likelihood—and in Peter Munthe Bruun’s version—the truth was that “he could not endure his family situation.”

There is no evidence of how the merchant Kierkegaard reacted to his son’s decision, but the lure of the unknown and of limitless possibility was not foreign to him. Indeed, in his own day, he had left the blasted heath of Jutland for the flourishing life of the capital. Still, the differences were striking. The cost of a one-way ticket across the Atlantic was itself in the neighborhood of one hundred to one hundred fifty rixdollars. That was considerably more money than Niels Andreas had at his disposal. Thus he could only flee to America by borrowing money from the man he was fleeing from. On Saturday, August 18, 1832, he signed two contracts. The first document detailed a rather stiff and loveless arrangement concerning Niels Andreas’s inheritance rights if Ane Kierkegaard were to predecease her husband. The second contract listed the amounts his father had advanced him in connection with his coming journey, point by point: 312 rixdollars and 50 shillings for books, clothing, and other necessities; 300 rixdollars for freight and passage; and 400 rixdollars in cash and letters of credit; all in all, 1,012 rixdollars and 50 shillings. The contracts were also signed by two legal witnesses: Peter Christian, who was four years older than Niels Andreas, and Søren Aabye, four years younger.

On Wednesday, August 29, 1832, Niels Andreas went aboard the brig *Massasoit of Plymouth*. The ship did not sail directly to Boston, however, as Captain Gibbs decided to sail to Gothenburg in hopes of picking up additional passengers. As a symbolic augury of Niels Andreas’s fate, the next day, August 30, Nicoline Christine gave birth to a stillborn son. Not quite a week later her condition was so critical that they sent to the Borgerdyd

School for Peter Christian. When he arrived she was calmer, though she soon became delirious again, and the attending physicians, L. L. Jacobsen and Joachim Ballesig, had to bleed her, apply leeches, and keep an ice pack on her throbbing temples around the clock. The next day she was a bit better and could be bathed, but on the evening of Monday, September 10, death tightened its final grip on the febrile woman. Four days later Mynster delivered what Peter Christian's diary describes as "a priceless little sermon," after which people went out to Assistens Cemetery and interred the remains in the Lund family burial plot. Johan Christian Lund, age thirty-four, was left with Henrik, age seven; Michael, age six; Sophie, age five; and little Carl, two years old.

As usual, the Rudelbach sisters were on the spot and could report the latest news of the Kierkegaard saga to their older brother: "Just lately the poor family is beset with much grief: Their eldest daughter, married to the eldest Lund, is dead after delivering their fifth child. The birth went extremely well, and the woman was fine afterwards, but the boy died and the midwife did not do enough to get rid of the milk, which went up into her brain, so that the poor woman went mad and died ten days later. Recently their son the shopkeeper set off for North America to seek his fortune there. So the old folks cannot expect to see him again. The doctor [Peter Christian] will also be leaving town soon, so the poor parents have grief enough to endure just now." There is a note of drama in the misses' report but also something of that repellent lack of feeling that is typical of those who gossip too much.

The pained and poignant letter that thirty-one-year-old Petrea Severine wrote to Niels Andreas in early November 1832 is in an utterly different vein. Petrea Severine was not accustomed to writing. She repeatedly made mistakes in the use of capital and small letters at the beginnings of sentences, and her punctuation needed improvement, but it is precisely this latter trait—the absence of pauses—that gives her letter the breathless tone that surely reflected Petrea Severine's own state. Her thoughts seem to have run directly out of the pen and onto the paper in a sort of stream of consciousness. "Dear Brother / I have wanted to write to you for a long time but I have been so sorrowful and dejected that I have been unable to bring myself to do it the sad cause Nicoline's death which occurred shortly after your departure you have I presume learned of from [Johan] Christian's *letters* it has spread a loss in the family which I think no one feels more than I and Christian you will certainly say but to judge from appearances he is dealing with it better than I now it has been two months and I think I miss her more than in the beginning it has made a great assault on my mood which was in any case bad enough before the world is so dark and sad to me I

almost said that nothing gives me joy but isn't it true that I have my husband and my children and I hope that time will also heal this wound some nice news from you which I yearn for terribly much would do a lot but I miss a female to confide in I do have Trine of course but despite the fact that I like her very much I feel that she is not after all my sister and when I look at the dear children and think what they have lost then you can believe that a person could certainly become sorrowful." At this point, about halfway through her letter, Petrea Severine puts the only period in the entire epistle. The remainder deals with the latest goings-on in Copenhagen, but she is more or less indifferent about all that: She has already written the most important part, and so she concludes the letter abruptly, not even bothering to put a final period at the end. Nor did she ever send the letter. She buried it in a dresser drawer and thereby bequeathed to posterity the only known bit of written testimony about herself.

In the ensuing months Peter Christian visited the motherless children regularly. He tutored them a bit, but his offer to move in with their family was vetoed by Kierkegaard the elder; the father explained that his prohibition was "for Søren's sake." Peter Christian was apparently the only one capable of managing the various practical matters involved, but it was a struggle for him because he was by nature neither decisive nor energetic. He was always of two minds about things, and Søren Aabye called him "pusillanimous," an odd term, which really means "having the spirit of a boy or an infant," "cowardly," "worried in unmanly fashion," "fickle-minded," or even "narrow-minded." When the professorship in philosophy at the University of Kristiania [now Oslo] fell vacant, Peter Christian was for a time tempted to apply for it but he abandoned his plans after Mynster intimated that it would be a waste of intellectual resources to send a man like him to Norway! So he remained in Copenhagen and wasted his intellectual resources as a private tutor for mediocre theology students and as a teacher at the Borgerdyd School. "He teaches," the Rudelbach sisters wrote in a letter dated January 21, 1833, "twenty-four hours each week at the Borgerdyd School: Latin, Greek, and religion. He debates twice a week in a debating society whose purpose is to exercise its members in the art of debate." His indecisiveness resurfaced when a clerical call on the Øeland peninsula in Jutland fell vacant. Peter Christian wanted to get away from "the capital, with its capital temptations," but by the time he made up his mind to apply for position, someone else had already taken it, and he had to apply for a call on the north Jutland island of Mors—"in accordance with Father's wishes; whether it is in accordance with my own, I myself hardly know." At the end of February 1833 he learned that he had been appointed to the position, but then he fell into uncertainty and looked for a sign by opening the Bible

at random. The omens were favorable, but when he presented himself for ordination on March 6, he felt himself utterly unworthy of the position, so after taking counsel with his father, who called the whole business mere “weakness and hypochondria,” he turned to Grundtvig, who advised him to withdraw from the position, which—“Thank God!”—his father did not oppose. But that was not the end of the affair. While friends and acquaintances were still congratulating him on his appointment, he had to seek an audience with the king in order to obtain royal permission to submit a request to resign the position. The king was not lenient but did let him off with a moderate reprimand and gave his permission. The matter attracted notice. “These days people talk of nothing else,” bumbled one of the Rudelbach birdies, who furnished page upon page of gossip in their letter to brother Andreas. Pastor Kolthoff, whose diary otherwise recorded only events of great importance—for example, which professors had come to hear him preach—noted laconically in his entry for March 16, 1833: “Kierkegaard asks to be permitted to resign as a preacher.”

A couple of days later, on March 18, 1833, a letter from Niels Andreas finally arrived. His ship had waited in the harbor in Gothenburg for an entire month before proceeding across the Atlantic, and he had thus had plenty of time to reconsider his intentions and return home. Captain Gibbs had not succeeded in finding more passengers for the trip, so in addition to the captain himself, the first mate, six seamen, and two cabin boys, Niels Andreas had been the only person on board when the *Massasoit of Plymouth* had sailed for Boston on September 29, 1832, fully laden with Swedish iron and timber. Fifty days later, on the morning of Saturday, November 17, 1832, he had gone ashore in Boston. The letter that arrived in Copenhagen on March 18, 1833, had been written on January 8, more than two months before, but it had languished long in the General Post Office in London because the American postage, the equivalent of three pounds sterling, had not been paid.

Now ship letter no. 6310 had finally reached the worried merchant Kierkegaard, and on the upper margin of the first page he noted the date of receipt, while Peter Christian noted it in his diary: “On this day Father received the first letter from Niels in Providence.” The letter opened with many excuses and had clearly been written out of a heavy sense of filial obligation: “I have wanted to write you on many occasions, but I put it off time and again because I did not have any good news to report and I was afraid of making you worry. I realize how stupid that was, since of course no worry could have been greater than that of not hearing from me.” After several weeks of shuttling back and forth between Boston and New York with his Danish letters of recommendation, which no one wanted to read,

he was now in Providence with a merchant named James C. Richmond, who had attempted, thus far without success, to find him a position. Like thousands of other hopeful immigrants, Niels Andreas had been compelled to realize that the country that was supposed to be flowing with milk and honey was populated with restlessly busy fortune hunters who did not keep their word but cheerfully bluffed their way through as best they could. The low self-esteem of the letter's author was reflected in his handwriting, which was neat, almost elegant, but was without any personal stamp; only when he signs himself "Your devoted son, N. A. Kierkegaard," does his handwriting become as firm as that of his father.

In his next letter, dated February 26 and addressed to Peter Christian, who had informed him of Nicoline Christine's death, Niels Andreas related that he had left Providence and was again in Boston. He had still not been successful in "finding employment in my field." Indeed, if he could only find a position in "a good office," he would work without pay. It is not surprising that he found everything in the New World to be very expensive. America, he declared quite touchingly, is "home to every artisan, every ordinary working man, and every segment of society excepting merchants without money and office workers without special fluency in modern languages." He whiled away his many idle hours studying English, and he made progress: He had already been taken for an American a couple of times. And he had also begun to learn Spanish for business use. He wanted to keep up his native tongue, however, and he therefore hoped that his letter could serve as the start of a "lively correspondence" with Peter Christian, who must absolutely correct him whenever he "might make mistakes, whether in language or in style." If Peter Christian would ask Søren Aabye to do the same, it would make Niels Andreas very happy: "He has a good head and has made better use of his talents than I have made of mine thus far."

Shortly after this first letter arrived Peter Christian cobbled together a letter based on his father's dictation. The letter was mailed off on March 23 and has since been lost, as has Peter Christian's own letter of May 6, but from a short summary of its contents in Peter Christian's diary we can conclude that he not only expressed criticism of the usefulness of his younger brother's "linguistic and historical studies, et cetera," but that he also expressed "at length" his doubts regarding the risky business schemes his brother had hatched. Niels Andreas wanted to import drapery goods to Boston and with this in mind he had suggested to his brother-in-law Johan Christian Lund that they establish transatlantic cooperation. The young wholesale dealer Lund found this idea so attractive that despite Peter Christian's reservations he had started shipping goods from Copenhagen to Boston, where Niels Andreas was to serve as a distributor.

When the brig *Envoy* reached its destination there was no one to receive the goods, however. It was as though Niels Andreas had disappeared from the face of the earth. Expressing equal parts of anxiety and irritation, Peter Christian wrote in his diary in July that “the lack of letters and the longing for same causes me many unpleasant moments these days.” As the weeks went by, the brothers Johan Christian and Henrik Ferdinand Lund also became uneasy about their expatriate brother-in-law, whose problems they related in a letter to their brother Peter Wilhelm in Brazil, who replied on August 2, expressing the hope that the matter might “take a turn for the better.” When the entire month of August had passed without any sign of life from Niels Andreas, Peter Christian reiterated, in a letter dated September 9, the contents of the letter his father had dictated on March 23. The tone was brusque and hortatory, but the letter was never answered.

In October the explanation arrived: For most of the summer Niels Andreas had lain ill in a hotel room in Paterson, New Jersey, about thirty miles northwest of New York City. In the meanwhile the drapery goods from Johan Christian had been unloaded in Boston, but since no one had turned up to claim the six bales of coarse and fine textiles, they had been stored at the customs warehouse, awaiting the day when they would be removed from the shelves at the behest of yet another adventurer who might chance along. Johan Christian Lund had thus lost about one thousand rixdollars on his transatlantic venture. It is unclear what had brought Niels Andreas to Paterson from New York, where he presumably had spent three or four months, but it is likely that he had moved to New Jersey in the hope of finding employment. On October 25, 1833, Peter Christian received a letter from Ralph Williston, an Episcopal priest. The letter was dated September 15 and in it Williston asked his Danish colleague to prepare his mother for her son’s imminent death. A bit less than a week later the family learned that Niels Andreas had died on September 21 and had been buried the following day, a Sunday, at Saint Paul’s cemetery in Sandy Hill. The day after receiving this sad news the family published an obituary in the *Adresseavisen*: “On their own behalf and on behalf of his surviving siblings, notice is hereby given by his profoundly grieving parents that our beloved son, Niels Andreas Kierkegaard, was called from this life on September 21 in the city of Paterson in North America, twenty-four and one-half years old. Copenhagen, October 31, 1833. A. Kierkegaard née Lund. M. P. Kierkegaard.” That was the end of Niels Andreas. “May God grant him a joyous resurrection,” wrote Peter Christian, when he subsequently noted the death day in his diary.

Later, on December 3, after most of the condolence notes had been received, a letter several pages in length arrived from Ralph Williston, the

Episcopal priest. The letter was dated October 14, 1833, and was addressed to “Mrs. Anna Kierkegaard,” who was thus the recipient—presumably for the first and only time in her life—of a letter addressed solely to herself. Williston recounts how he had sat by Niels Andreas day and night during his final days and had heard him speak so beautifully of his mother, his sisters, and his brothers. And the letter concludes: “Happy the Son who has such a Mother—and happy the Mother who has such a Son.”

It was moving, but it was also terrifying, because in all his solicitude for the grieving mother Williston seemed to have entirely forgotten that Niels Andreas had also had a father! Was it forgetfulness, just a misunderstanding, or was this perhaps a conscious omission—a sort of revenge? The merchant Kierkegaard was so tormented by these thoughts that he asked Peter Christian to write to Williston and request a complete explanation. And Peter Christian did just that. The letter—which Peter Christian quite uncharacteristically transcribed in his diary—was mailed off on December 22, 1833, in two copies, each sent by a different vessel because the matter was so important to the old man that he could not risk the possibility that his inquiry might not reach its destination. Peter Christian asked Williston to explain—“if You can”—why Niels Andreas had made no mention whatever of his father, “to whom this circumstance has given a great deal of trouble and caused many an inquiet night.” Typically for Peter Christian, he added the suggestion that perhaps he himself might have been indirectly responsible for his brother’s silence on this matter because one of his final letters to Niels Andreas had spoken of their father in such a fashion that his brother *might* have concluded that their father was mortally ill or even that he had been dead and buried for some time.

Peter Christian had earned a magister degree on the subject of lying, and he knew how to tell a white lie in an emergency. As far as is known, Williston never answered, but later in the year the Rogers family, Niels Andreas’s hosts in Paterson, provided assurances that Niels Andreas had never at any time said that his father was dead. A fear such as that which Peter Christian had expressed about a possible misunderstanding was entirely groundless—and so, one might add, was the hope that Peter Christian had tried to sustain in his troubled father. Reluctantly, the senior Kierkegaard was compelled to realize that his son’s silence was not attributable to any misunderstanding, but rather to the frightful fact that he had been written off as a father. “He gave You, my dear Madam, great credit for his religious education,” Williston had written in his letter to “Mrs. Anna Kierkegaard.” As merciless as it was unambiguous.

During the winter of 1833–34 the Kierkegaard family home must have been a hell of grief and self-reproach. With an especially heavy-handed

symbolism, rain poured down almost without interruption for two months. Peter Christian could not decide whether to apply for a vacant position at the university; he finally did so, but no sooner had he got it than a position at Sorø Academy seemed more attractive to him, and he was once again compelled to endure “a harsh reprimand” from Mynster. In the course of the spring his relations with his younger brother seem to have become more strained, and in his diary he repeatedly noted his attempts to become “truly reconciled with Søren.” But despite the fact that the two brothers lived in adjacent rooms, the distance between them was apparently too great.

After the wet winter, hot weather took hold, and during the course of the summer the city became a virtual oven, unendurable for everyone, including the family’s little pet bird, whose death Peter Christian commemorated with an elegant little cross in his diary entry of July 23, 1834. He was convinced that the bird’s death was an ill omen. His mother had lain ill with fever for a number of weeks and was still quite sick. Everything was drooping from the heat, and anyone with money was getting out of town. Among this group was Søren Aabye, who on July 26 took off for Gilleleje, a little fishing village on the north coast of Zealand, “in order to spend two weeks there for the sake of his health,” as his older brother, stuck in the city, noted tartly in his diary. Four days later this same diary reports: “On the morning of Wednesday the 30th things were significantly worse with Mother, so that I feared a stroke. One of Johan Christian Lund’s office employees was sent to Gilleleje after Søren Aabye, but he could only come home the next morning.” And by then it was too late. During the night Ane had passed away after a long, mostly silent death struggle. At one point, however, she did mention Søren Michael, who had died fifteen years before, though not Niels Andreas despite the fact that he had apparently been quite close to her. The burial certificate lists the cause of death as “nerve fever,” perhaps caused by the typhus which the family physician D. A. von Nutzhorn had spoken of several weeks earlier. On Saturday, August 2 the *Adresseavisen* carried the following notice, signed by M. P. Kierkegaard, under “Deaths”: “On behalf of myself and of our children, notice is hereby given to absent relatives and friends that during the night of July 30–31 my precious wife, Anne Kierkegaard, née Lund, age sixty-seven, passed away peacefully, after almost thirty-eight years of marriage.”

On Monday, August 4, Mynster buried her at Assistens Cemetery. Afterwards he movingly expressed his sympathy to Michael Kierkegaard, who took in Mynster’s words and then replied: “Your Reverence, should we not go into the next room and drink a glass of wine?” Hans Brøchner explains that this might sound insensitive but that Mynster who of course knew Kierkegaard, understood the remark as an expression of emotional

delicacy. Peter Christian's diary contains a retrospective consideration of the period after the burial: "My mood became increasingly somber. But thank God, after some hesitation I took *communion* with Father and Søren on the fifteenth [of August]. . . . If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men! [Romans 12:18]" There were strained relations between the two brothers who despite much theological goodwill simply could not abide one another.

On December 12, 1834, the merchant Kierkegaard celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday. There was not much to celebrate, but his youngest daughter, Petrea Severine, who was very pregnant, came by to congratulate him. She had fiery strawberry blonde hair and was Søren Aabye's favorite sister. The next day she gave birth to a healthy and robust boy, but three days later she suddenly fell ill. Despite the fact that she was able to nurse her son, it was feared that her milk would go up into her brain and make her mad. But a boil on one of her legs was a sign that the emetics that the doctor had prescribed for her in order to drive the milk back down were taking effect. They were mistaken, however. Two days before the year's end she died amid violent convulsions. She was thirty-three years old. Mynster buried her on January 4, 1835. Left behind in the quiet rooms on Blegdamsvej were her husband Henrik Ferdinand Lund, two years her junior; plus Henriette, age five; Vilhelm, age three; Peter, age one; and a sixteen-day-old baby boy who, in memory of the mother he never knew, was given the name Peter Severin.

The day before Petrea Severine's burial the merchant Kierkegaard paid forty-six rixdollars for a gravestone for Niels Andreas. He had now lost five of his seven children. And little Ane, too.