

The existential meaning of the art of theatre in Kierkegaard's philosophy

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In this paper, I will consider Kierkegaard's approach to the art of theatre: Does he view the art of theatre as existentially relevant to concrete existence or does he see the art per se, as well as the attendance at theatrical performances, as reflecting a break with life?

One of the characteristic ways of describing the relationship between art – including the art of theatre – and existence in Kierkegaard's thought, appears in the work of S. Crites:

...the modern reader is likely to be doubtful about the idealistic premises that inform his discussions of art, and may be troubled by the apparent separation of art from life, or at least from the ethical and religious centre of human existence.¹

This description seems justified since the theatre is a classic expression of the aesthetic stage, as the latter is described by Kierkegaard. The aesthetic stage, by its very nature, is severed from the ethical problem of concrete existence – self-choice. Moreover, Kierkegaard himself ascribes to the theatre a status of “artificial actuality” or “shadow existence.”² In a critique of his times Kierkegaard writes: “This public likes to transform all actuality into a theatre, to have nothing to do itself but imagine that everything anyone does happens in order for it to have something to chatter about.”³ The theatre is a medium of the imagination and, as such, it separates man from existence. Both actor and spectator are together in an illusory world of suffering and tension, rather than experience the suffering and tension of concrete existence.⁴

Kierkegaard claims that, in fact, the theatre serves to compensate man for his inability to contend with existence. In the theatre, victories never won in life come within reach.

When you are sitting in the theatre ... you have the courage to require of the poet that he shall let his aesthetics triumph over all paltriness. It is the only comfort left ... it is you who take comfort in this, you to whom real

life has furnished no occasion to make test of your strength. You are the poor and unfortunate one, like the hero and the heroine in the play, but you have also the pathos, courage ... from which eloquence gushes in powerful stream; you conquer; you applaud the actor, and the actor is yourself, and the applause of the parterre is for you for, indeed, you yourself are the hero and the actor. In dreams, in the airy visions of aesthetics, you men are heroes.⁵

Therefore, assuming that Kierkegaard advises his contemporaries to shun speculation, imagination and poetry,⁶ he is also clearly suggesting that they keep away from theatre, which embodies total separation from life and offers artificial actuality as an alternative to existence.

However, this presentation of Kierkegaard's approach is incompatible with his own deep personal attachment to the theatre, which he attended frequently and discussed extensively throughout his work and in his journals. If his aim were indeed to distance himself from the theatre and embrace concrete existence, his actions would seem to indicate exactly the opposite intention.

It could justifiably be claimed that this contradiction clearly reflects Kierkegaard's personal tragedy: unable to come close to life, he was forced to live in the imaginary medium of the theatre. Kierkegaard himself expressed this view in his journal:

For many years my depression has prevented me from saying *Du* to myself in the profoundest sense. Between my *Du* and my depression lay a whole world of imagination ... Just as a person who does not have a happy home goes out as much as possible ... so my depression has kept me outside myself while I have been discovering and poetically experiencing a whole world of imagination.⁷

But I believe that this explanation, which perpetuates the contradiction as grounded on personal tragedy, does not exhaust the issue. In this paper, I will suggest a new analysis of Kierkegaard's position that views the theatre as endowed with basic existential meaning; this analysis will clarify this meaning as well as Kierkegaard's critique of the art of theatre.

As a starting point, I wish to outline briefly the ontological characterization of human existence proposed by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death*. In this source, man's ontological structure and his existential task are introduced by means of two basic concepts – synthesis and self-relation – “a relation that relates itself to itself.” Synthesis is the basic ontological given of human existence, while self-relation is the relation to this synthesis as it is forged and concretized, and is thus an existential task.⁸

What are the elements of the synthesis? Kierkegaard describes it as a “synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.”⁹ Kierkegaard offers several descriptions of the

synthesis, all of which reveal it as essentially composed of two opposite poles, one limiting and the other expanding the self. Finitude, temporality and necessity limit the self; they emphasize the fact that the self is determined by concrete given facts.¹⁰ These facts include the complex of social, physical and other factors that turn man into a concrete entity. The opposite pole, including infinitude, eternity and possibility, is the pole that expands human life and enables man to transcend his factual existence. Infinity is described by Kierkegaard as “the extending constituent;”¹¹ similarly, through possibility, man can transcend the bounds of his factual existence and even suggest modes of living which are totally removed from it.

How does this transcendence take place? How does man expand his concrete existence? Kierkegaard’s answer is, through imagination: “Imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing.”¹² Through imagination man suggests to himself different possibilities of self-realization which, since they are perhaps not his own, may sever him from his concrete existence and turn him into an abstract entity; namely, these possibilities may be totally unrelated to his factual existence. Kierkegaard describes this extreme situation as follows:

But if possibility outruns necessity so that the self runs away from itself in possibility, it has no necessity to which it is to return... this possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more becomes possible because nothing becomes actual. Eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self.¹³

Kierkegaard refers to this situation as “possibility’s despair” or “infinitude’s despair.”

Man’s existence can likewise be compressed and exhausted by given factuality, without any transcendence or awareness of possibilities beyond concrete existence. This type of existence is characterized by a sense of necessity and limitation.¹⁴

Thus, in and by itself, each one of the elements in this synthesis may lead man to total separation from the other element, and this separation entails despair. In other words, despair reflects man’s inability to create harmony and balance between the two elements of the synthesis.¹⁵ Kierkegaard himself indeed points out that characterizing man as a synthesis is not sufficient: “A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.”¹⁶

In order to become a self, man must relate to the constitutive elements of the synthesis and forge it; it is this relationship which establishes the self. We must therefore raise the question: what is this relationship and how does it evolve? According to Kierkegaard, this relationship unfolds in two stages. In the first stage, described by Kierkegaard as “an infinite moving away

from itself in the infinitizing of the self,” man transcends his factual existence.¹⁷ This transcendence expands the self and opens up a variety of possibilities. The second stage is exactly the opposite and, within it, man returns to concrete life, “an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process;”¹⁸ in this process man chooses those possibilities related to and appropriate to his given factual existence. The realization of these two stages constitutes self-relation, and it is only through them that man becomes a concrete entity.¹⁹

Concreteness is thus not identical with original factual necessity, and certainly not with the various possibilities, but rather with the process of returning from possibilities to factuality. In other words, concreteness is not identical with one of the elements in the synthesis; rather, it is attained by adopting both elements, in the course of shaping a relation of balance and compatibility between them. Attaining this concreteness is thus man’s existential task, and within it he decides on his very existence.

This description of human existence enables us to return to our discussion on the existential significance of the theatre. My thesis suggests that, according to Kierkegaard, the theatre is one of the main available media for introducing existential possibilities and, as such, it realizes one of the poles in the synthesis – possibility and infinity. The theatre thus entails the danger characteristic of possibility – separation from factual existence – as well as its great prospect – the transcendence of given factuality. The following statements on the theatre appear in *Repetition*:

There is probably no young person with any imagination who has not at times been enthralled by the magic of the theatre and wished to be swept along into that artificial actuality in order, like a double, to see and hear himself and to split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself.²⁰

Kierkegaard refers to these possibilities as shadows, namely, these possibilities are imaginary and unreal but man must pass through them in order to reach himself,²¹ in light of the ontological position described above which does not see the self as a finished fact that man must find once and for all. Man does not reach himself by returning to a given self, but by contending with various possibilities of realization; he does not reveal or discover the self, he becomes one.²²

A theatre spectator in fact contemplates various possibilities that must be contended with in order to eventually attain concreteness. In this regard, the theatre resembles all other aesthetic expressions, which manifest man’s very ability to transcend finitude and necessity. Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of this matter when he claims that the value of aesthetics is grounded exactly “on the power to wish, the courage and foolhardiness to wish.”²³

However, the theatre is not only capable of presenting a variety of possibilities, as emerges from this passage in *Repetition*; it has a further meaning. The theatre tangibly illustrates the actor's opportunity to transcend his given situation and identify with another character or another possibility, one not identical with his factual existence.²⁴ The portrayal of the actress Johanne Luise Heiberg, who is the ideal actor in Kierkegaard's eyes and to whom he dedicated his book *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, is particularly interesting in this regard. Heiberg's greatness is expressed in her ability to present the essential idea in a perfect way – though this idea may differ from her concrete life and even be antithetical to it²⁵ – thereby reflecting the actress' freedom and her ability to transcend her own situation.²⁶

But this analysis does not exhaust the full particularity of the art of theatre. In order to clarify this question further, we must reconsider the meaning of artistic creativity. Kierkegaard sees art as expressing and representing an idea, and he classifies the various arts according to this definition.²⁷ In his view, the art using language as its medium is endowed with the highest spiritual value, and this for various reasons: first, because "language is the most concrete of all media;"²⁸ second, because time is an essential element of language, unlike sculpture and painting, that "have space as their element"²⁹ and third, because language is directed to the listener's ear and the ear "is the most spiritually determined of the senses."³⁰ Therefore, Kierkegaard concludes that language is the medium most appropriate to the spirit and it is through language that ideas attain their highest expression.³¹

Of all arts that have language as their medium, theatre is special in that the idea is not only heard, but also concretely embodied in the actor. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard states that the theatre endows possibilities with a special magic since:

... the individual's possibility does not want only to be heard; it is not like the mere passing of the wind. It is also *gestaltende* [configuring] and therefore wants to be visible at the same time.³²

It is crucially important that, in the theatre, the form is materialized in a concrete character since, as Kierkegaard claims, "He [the actor] impersonates a distinct individual. In the skillful sense of this illusory art, each word becomes true when embodied in him, true through him."³³ The "truth" of which Kierkegaard speaks in this passage alludes to the fact that, rather than appearing abstractly, words are linked and conveyed within the wholeness of the actor's character. In this regard, the actor's achievement is higher than that of the writer since, by incarnating the linguistic creation, the actor presents the work in a new light.³⁴ In sum, in the theatrical

medium the idea becomes complete and assumes depth in the personality of the actor, who expresses it through the totality of his powers.³⁵

The power of the theatre to express the idea in its most concrete form points to its special existential status. On the one hand, as I indicated, the theatre fully concretizes the element of possibility found in the ontological structure but, on the other hand, its very concreteness creates a problem. Although this concreteness is only apparent, some may be seduced into seeing it as the real world. The theatre thus competes with concrete reality precisely because it offers to concretize possibility.

In light of this analysis, it is clear that Kierkegaard's critique does not pertain to the theatrical medium *per se*. The theatre is highly valued as long as it does not exceed its limits and does not pretend to supersede existence and replace the true ethical task faced by man – choice and self-moulding. Kierkegaard's critique hence relates only to a situation where the theatre, rather than part of a process of concretization, becomes identical with the process itself. In this situation, real existence loses its meaning and is replaced by imagination. Kierkegaard believed, as we saw, that this situation represented the cultural reality of his times, as well as the anguish of his personal condition.³⁶ However, while for his contemporaries this was the ideal situation, Kierkegaard expressed throughout his work hopes of overcoming it and returning to existence itself. This hope indicates his wish to concretize the ontological structure as a whole; though at times Kierkegaard senses he is attaining this aim, he never truly succeeds.³⁷

In sum, the theatre is both the opportunity and the trap of human existence and man must undergo this experience despite all the hardships, since he thereby attains possibility and transcends necessity.

The existential importance of the theatre is further confirmed by the meaning of the pseudonymous work. One of the distinguishing literary features of this work is the theatrical element, best defined by Thust as a marionettes' play.³⁸ Kierkegaard creates pseudonymous characters, who themselves create other pseudonymous characters, occasionally turning toward one another. For instance, Victor Eremita, the pseudonymous author of *Either/Or*, describes the aesthete and the judge observing the aesthete. Johannes De Silentio describes three characters, the knight of faith and the knight of infinite resignation, who reflects the biblical Abraham. These characters do indeed resemble marionettes: they are unreal, one-sided and reflect ideal types not met in reality. Kierkegaard indicates this by saying: "A pseudonym is excellent for accentuating a point, a stance, a position. It creates a poetic person"³⁹ and adds that every pseudonym actually suggests a possible *Weltanschauung*.⁴⁰

This perception of the literary work as theatre sheds further light on the meaning of the pseudonymous work. As is well known, scholars are divided

over the question: for whom is this work intended? Some believe this work reflects Kierkegaard's interest in himself; through the literary work, Kierkegaard strives to attain a clearer understanding of his own self.⁴¹ Others believe the pseudonymous work reflects, first and foremost, Kierkegaard's wish to detach himself from the work and focus on the contents as a product offered to the reader,⁴² while still others believe that the pseudonymous work combines both these aims.⁴³

Kierkegaard himself appears to side with the second option. Thus, for instance, in the *First and Last Declaration* he emphatically states that the views expressed by the pseudonyms are not his own and his attitude to them is that of an outsider: "I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a third person."⁴⁴ Similarly, he states in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*: "One will perceive the significance of the pseudonyms and why I must be pseudonymous in relation to all aesthetic productions, because I led my own life in entirely different categories."⁴⁵ This approach blends with the special significance of indirect communication, which Kierkegaard had stressed.⁴⁶

However, we can also find many other contrary statements, where Kierkegaard stresses that he personally developed through his work. For instance, in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, he claims:

my whole activity as a writer ... was at the same time my own education, in the course of which I learnt to reflect more and more deeply upon my idea, my task.⁴⁷

Accordingly, Kierkegaard indeed retracted his own thesis, where he had suggested that the pseudonymous works entail deceit, namely, that they lead to truth by means of indirect communication.⁴⁸ This is not a rare statement and, in his journals as well, Kierkegaard claims he is not a teacher in possession of the truth and using indirect communication in order to convey it to others. He clearly states: "I myself have developed during the writing"⁴⁹ and, in this regard, writing is the avenue for his personal development: "the work is also my development, and I have gradually learnt to understand myself."⁵⁰

Moreover, Kierkegaard remarks that throughout his life and in all his work his concern had been with himself:

On the whole, the very mark of my genius is that Governance broadens and radicalizes whatever concerns me personally. I remember what a pseudonymous writer said about Socrates: "... his whole life was personal preoccupation with himself, and then Governance comes and adds world-historical significance to it."⁵¹

Kierkegaard's attitude to his work is thus ambivalent, and he is both close to and detached from it. His work is the arena for his personal development, but is not a reflection of his concrete life. Is this a contradiction typical of Kierkegaard? I believe it can be solved once the theatrical element and its significance within the ontological structure and the existential task are approached seriously. Creative work is a theatre offering various existential possibilities or ideas that suggest themselves to Kierkegaard and his readers as self-realization. These possibilities do not reflect Kierkegaard and, in their regard, he is only an observer; by definition, possibility transcends factual existence. But Kierkegaard develops through possibility and through the contemplation of these *Weltanschauungen*, as would anyone undergoing such a process.

The contradiction in Kierkegaard thus reflects, according to this interpretation, different moments in the process of self-realization. Kierkegaard's distance from his work points to the latter's nature as possibility, while his closeness to it reveals it as part of a process of concretization which is unattainable except by transcending the given fact and returning to it.

In this regard, Kierkegaard's writing is his voyage into himself, the voyage he must undertake in order to reach himself. This journey takes place along the different paths traced by imagination: literary work, theatre and art as a whole.

In one of his early journal entries, Kierkegaard stresses that his wish is to find or understand himself. When describing this task he writes: "the crucial thing is to find ... the idea for which I am willing to live and die."⁵²

Self-understanding is thus translated as finding an idea. Thompson believes this is a very strange notion, "for he proposes to understand himself really by looking away from himself."⁵³ Thompson accuses Kierkegaard of turning to imagination rather than turning inwards, and then claims that the outcome of this process is an imaginary rather than a concrete self.

However, in making this accusation, Thompson fails to acknowledge the meaning of imagination and self-transcendence in Kierkegaardian ontology. Indeed, man must understand himself, but this understanding can only be attained by contending with all the possibilities or ideas offered to the self. Therefore, when Kierkegaard struggles with himself about himself, he goes beyond himself to the pseudonyms and the theatre.

In sum, the pseudonym, like the theatre, is a medium of imagination. Life itself must be led in totally different categories. As any activity of imagination, the theatre plays an important existential role, but only as a moment in the process of concretization, which explains Kierkegaard's complex attitude toward it.

Notes

1. The quote is from Crites' introduction to Kierkegaard's book, *Crisis in the Life of an Actress* (London: Collins, 1967), p. 37.
2. *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 154.
3. *Two Ages*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 136. See also *Ibid.*, p. 72.
4. *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1977), #1051 and #4881. Numbers refer to passages. Hereafter *SKJP*.
5. *Either/Or*, Vol. II, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 124.
6. See *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 74–75.
7. *SKJP*, #5980.
8. *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 13 and ff. My presentation of Kierkegaard's position is brief; for an extensive analysis see Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 109 and ff.; John W. Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 29–32.
9. *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 35–36. See also *Either/Or*, Vol II, p. 220.
11. *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 30.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 36.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
14. See *Ibid.*, pp. 33–35, 37–42.
15. For a thorough and extensive discussion of the problem of harmony and balance in the self in Kierkegaard's philosophy see Vincent A. McCarthy, *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
16. *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Repetition*, p. 154.
21. See *Ibid.*, p. 156.
22. Compare F. Sontag, "Kierkegaard and the Search for a Self," *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 155–156.
23. *SKJP*, #973.
24. Compare Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 29–30.
25. See *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, pp. 76–77, 85–87. The book discusses Heiberg's return in her later years to the role of Julia in *Romeo and Julia*, a part she had acted in her youth. The play was performed at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen on 23 January 1847.
26. See *Ibid.*, p. 78.

27. See *Either/Or*, Vol. I, trans. D. F. Swenson and L. M. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 52–73.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 67. In this context, Kierkegaard mentions that music is closest to language because it is the only art “that takes place in time.”
30. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
32. *Repetition*, p. 155.
33. *Purity of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), p. 180.
34. Compare *Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, p. 77.
35. This analysis reveals that Kierkegaard ascribes decisive importance to the dramatic hero who represents the idea. Indeed, Kierkegaard explicitly stated this in *Either/Or*, Vol. I, p. 116.
36. See *SKJP*, #5980.
37. See, e.g., *ibid.*, #6135.
38. See Martin Thust, “Das Marionettentheater Soren Kierkegaards,” *Zeitwende* 1(1925): 18–38.
39. *Armed Neutrality and An Open Letter*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 88.
40. *Ibid.*
41. See, e.g., T. H. Croxall, *Kierkegaard Studies* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1948), p. 23; Josiah Thompson, *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1967), pp. 62–71; Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, p. 4.
42. Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship*, pp. 18–26, 54–60; George Price, *The Narrow Pass: A Study of Kierkegaard's Concept of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1967), p. 14.
43. See, e.g., James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), pp. 35–38.
44. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 551.
45. *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, pp. 85–86, note.
46. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 67–71, 551. See also Mark C. Taylor, pp. 51–55.
47. See also *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, p. 137.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
49. *SKJP*, #6700.
50. *Soren Kierkegaards Papirer*, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting, 20 Vols. (Kobenhavn: Gyldendalske, 1909–1948), IXB 64.
51. *SKJP*, #6388. See also *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 132.
52. *SKJP*, #5100.
53. Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 52.