

Troy Wellington Smith

# From Enthusiasm to Irony: Kierkegaard's Reception of Norse Mythology and Literature

**Abstract:** Although the reader of *Either/Or* is intended to be, at the very least, somewhat ambivalent towards the Kierkegaardian pseudonym A, I argue that this character's enthusiasm for all things Old Norse is shared by the Kierkegaard of this period. Kierkegaard's interest in his region's romantic past, however, would be short-lived. As his authorship progressed from the aesthetic to the religious, he found himself in conflict with another titan of the Danish Golden Age, Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. Since Grundtvig's work dealt extensively with Norse mythology, Kierkegaard's interest in the Norse cooled as his polemics against Grundtvig caught fire.

The first defining work of the Danish Golden Age is Adam Oehlenschläger's "Guldhornene," which was published in his collection *Digte* on Christmas Day 1802.<sup>1</sup> The poem reflects Oehlenschläger's meeting over the previous summer with Henrik Steffens, who had just returned from Jena with the "poetic-scientific" gospel of F. W. J. Schelling. "Guldhornene," therefore, also announces the arrival of romanticism in Danish literature.<sup>2</sup> One of the most salient features of Danish romanticism is a revival of interest in Old Norse culture. The titular golden horns were two Viking Age drinking horns that had been stolen from the Royal Art Museum in Copenhagen. Although Oehlenschläger did not know at the time of the poem's composition that the horns had been melted down, "Guldhornene" nonetheless serves as a critique of the period's materialism. Blind to the mythological significance of the horns, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie can only appreciate their effulgence. The poet apostrophizes these philistines, claiming,

But you see only their flame,  
Not the venerable eminence!

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger, *Digte*, Copenhagen: Fr. Brummers Forlag 1803.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Greenway, *The Golden Horns: Mythic Imagination and the Nordic Past*, Athens: University of Georgia Press 2008, pp. 1f.

To set them as splendor to show  
For a dull, prying eye.<sup>3</sup>

Kierkegaard was no friend of the Danish bourgeoisie himself, and his entire authorship represents a concerted effort to arouse them from the torpor Oehlenschläger describes. In his two-volume novel *Either/Or*, which was published on 20 February 1843, he introduced the pseudonym known only as A, who strongly channeled the countercultural currents of Continental and British romanticism. As a Danish romantic, A also alludes to Norse mythology on a number of occasions. Although the reader is intended to be, at the very least, somewhat ambivalent towards A, I claim that this character's enthusiasm for all things Old Norse is shared by the Kierkegaard of this period. Kierkegaard's interest in his region's romantic past, however, would be short-lived. As his authorship progressed from the aesthetic to the religious, he found himself in conflict with another titan of the Danish Golden Age, Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig. Since Grundtvig's work dealt extensively with Norse mythology, Kierkegaard's interest in the Norse cooled, I argue, as his polemics against Grundtvig caught fire, as is manifest in Kierkegaard's lampooning of Grundtvig in 1846's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the point at which the philosopher's attitude towards Old Norse becomes ironical.

## I The First Authorship: Kierkegaard's Enthusiastic Reception of Old Norse

### A Sigurd and Brynhild

Before turning to *Either/Or*, which was published under the editorial pseudonym Victor Eremita, it will be instructive for our investigation into Kierkegaard's Old Norse sources to consider a work to which Kierkegaard signed his name, namely his doctoral dissertation of 1841, entitled *The Concept of Irony*. As the subtitle *With Continual Reference to Socrates* suggests, the first part of this monograph is an investigation into Socratic irony. Kierkegaard surveys the depictions of Socrates in Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes, and concludes that Aristophanes comes the closest to truly capturing Socrates. The second part of the

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger, "Guldhornene," in *100 Danish Poems from the Medieval Period to the Present Day*, ed. by Thomas Bredsdorff and Anne-Marie Mai, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2011, p. 144 (my translation).

dissertation examines the modern irony of the German romantics, which Kierkegaard criticizes from an ethical standpoint. Kierkegaard argues that Hegel's critique of irony is aimed at these German romantics, and not at the ancient form of irony introduced by Socrates.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Kierkegaard borrows freely from Hegel's case against the romantics.<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to the second part of the dissertation, he writes:

While the Schlegels and Tieck had their major importance in the polemic with which they destroyed a previous development, and while precisely for this reason their position became somewhat scattered, because it was not a principal battle they won but a multitude of skirmishes, Hegel, on the other hand, has absolute importance by defeating with his positive total view the polemical prudery, the subjugation of which, just as Queen Brynhild's virginity required more than an ordinary husband, required a Sigurd.<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard's point is that the Brothers Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck share a misconceived form of irony. In their opposition to the rationalism of bourgeois society in the wake of the Enlightenment, they have failed to produce anything enduring that could take its place. Hegel, on the other hand, saved philosophy from the pessimism that followed in the wake of the epistemological skepticism of Kant by offering a positive metaphysical system—that is, at least, according to the young Kierkegaard.

For this unparalleled victory over the forces of negation, Hegel earns a comparison with Sigurd of *The Saga of the Volsungs* (ca. 1270). This narrative is based on traditional Eddic verse, which in turn is based in part on actual historical episodes that occurred during the European folk migrations of the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Jørgen Dehs, Tonny Aagaard Olesen, and Sophia Scopetéa, as well as Kierkegaard's English translators Howard and Edna Hong, aver that Kierkegaard alludes here to the scene in which Sigurd fearlessly goes through fire to awaken Brynhild in her fortress.<sup>8</sup> Since Sigurd performs this feat in the shape of his comrade-in-arms Gunnar and then ensures Brynhild's chastity by placing the sword Gram, unsheathed, between them in the bed that they share for three nights, it is Gunnar who becomes Brynhild's husband once he and Sigurd have returned to their original forms. As for Brynhild's virginity, she has already had a daughter by Sigurd before this encounter.

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<sup>4</sup> SKS 1, 65 / CI, 6.

<sup>5</sup> K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2013 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 1), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> SKS 1, 284 / CI, 244.

<sup>7</sup> Jesse L. Byock, "Introduction," in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, London: Penguin 1999, pp. 2f.

<sup>8</sup> SKS K1, 327. See also CI, "Explanatory Notes," p. 539.

Named Aslaug, this child is not introduced to the reader until after Brynhild has married Gunnar, at which point she entrusts her to her foster father, Heimir.<sup>9</sup> Jesse L. Byock surmises that Aslaug is conceived on the estate of Heimir,<sup>10</sup> who is married to Brynhild's sister Bekkhild. Here Sigurd finds Brynhild embroidering a tapestry that depicts his slaying of the serpent Fafnir. The next day, Sigurd gives her a gold ring, and they renew their oaths to each other.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is Sigurd's title of dragon slayer, and not his ride through the flames, which first wins him the favors of the Valkyrie Brynhild. Yet the Hongs and Dehs, Aagaard Olesen, and Scopet ea would seem to have a valid reason for supposing that Kierkegaard refers to this latter feat when he claims in his dissertation that Brynhild required an extraordinary husband, as Heimir informs Gunnar that Brynhild has resolved to marry only the man who dares to go through the fire to reach her in her hall.<sup>12</sup> But to be more precise, Kierkegaard writes that "Queen Brynhild's virginity required more than an ordinary husband,"<sup>13</sup> i.e., a Sigurd. Sigurd, however, does not become Brynhild's husband; Gunnar does, but not before Sigurd begets a daughter by her. I have ruled out the possibility that a bowdlerized text would have led Kierkegaard to believe that Brynhild was a virgin bride, as Aslaug, her child by Sigurd, is introduced as such in the Danish translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs* found in Kierkegaard's personal library.<sup>14</sup> Although it is thus conceivable that Kierkegaard simply misread or misremembered the relevant passages of the saga, there are far more interesting possibilities to explore in connection with this analogy made between Sigurd and Hegel.

First, one should note something about the reception of *The Concept of Irony*. Ever since the book was reviewed by Kierkegaard's contemporaries, there has been an ongoing tradition of interpreting it as an irony in and of itself, particularly in its employment of a Hegelian apparatus.<sup>15</sup> Niels Thulstrup, one of the most notable advocates of this theory, goes so far as to say that "we can...simply consider Kierkegaard's name on the title page a pseudonym that represents a particular point of view on the basis of which the book was written, a

<sup>9</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. by Jesse L. Byock, London: Penguin 1999, pp. 80–82.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73–75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> SKS 1, 284 / *CI*, 244 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> *Volsunga-Saga eller Historien om Sigurd Fafnersbane*, in *Nordiske K empe-Historier efter islandske Haandskrifter*, trans. by Carl Christian Rafn, Copenhagen: Trykt paa Forfatterens Forlag 1821, vol. 2, p. 95 (ASKB 1993–1995).

<sup>15</sup> Soderquist, *The Isolated Self*, pp. 4f.

pseudonym that plays a role as a Hegelian historian of philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, in recent years, Jon Stewart has emerged as a thoroughgoing critic of Thulstrup for his depiction of Kierkegaard as an unambivalent anti-Hegelian. Stewart traces the supposed misconception that the dissertation is an irony aimed at Hegel back to Pierre Mesnard’s *Le vrai visage de Kierkegaard* (1948) and debunks the author’s claims that Kierkegaard sought to dupe a Hegelian dissertation committee. As Stewart demonstrates, there was only one Hegelian on this committee (Hans Lassen Martensen), and he was added to it after Kierkegaard had written most of the dissertation.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than attempting to unravel this debate over Kierkegaard’s relation to Hegel in *The Concept of Irony* so as to take a side, I wish simply to open up the text to the possibility that Kierkegaard likens Hegel to Sigurd ironically, as such an interpretation could shed light on his misprision of *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Indeed, there is something characteristically provocative in the idea that Kierkegaard would intentionally misidentify Sigurd as the husband of Brynhild when, in fact, Gunnar is the man. By way of Kierkegaard’s analogy, this would imply that Hegel is not actually the one to ultimately master “the polemical prudery” of the Jena romantics. Since Kierkegaard himself challenges Schlegel and Tieck in *The Concept of Irony*, the further implication would be that only he, and not Hegel, can conclusively pronounce romantic irony invalid.<sup>18</sup> Of course, Kierkegaard’s gendered imagery of mastery and subjugation borrowed from *The Saga of the Volsungs* only underscores the literary-philosophical *agon* between him and Hegel,<sup>19</sup> which runs like a red thread throughout the dissertation.

## B Gleipnir and the Fenris Wolf

In addition to reading Old Norse literature such as *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Kierkegaard also studied Norse mythology. At least three titles on the subject

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**16** Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel*, trans. by George L. Stengren, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, p. 215.

**17** Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 135–139.

**18** Admittedly, the soft spot of such a reading is the fact that in *The Saga of the Volsungs* Gunnar proves an unsatisfactory husband for Brynhild, as she continues to pine for Sigurd and, after precipitating his murder at the hands of Gunnar, immolates herself on her lover’s funeral pyre (pp. 84–93). Yet, since Sigurd nevertheless does not become Brynhild’s husband, an ironic interpretation of the Sigurd-Hegel analogy remains quite viable.

**19** See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Oxford University Press 1997 [1973].

by Grundtvig were found in his personal library at the time of his death, although only the former two were published before his dissertation and *Either/Or*: 1808's *Nordens Mytologi eller Udsigt over Eddalæren for dannede Mænd der ei selv ere Mytologer*,<sup>20</sup> 1832's *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilledsprog historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*,<sup>21</sup> and 1844's *Brage-Snak om Græske og Nordiske Myther og Oldsagn for Damer og Herrer*.<sup>22</sup> Part 1 of *Either/Or* begins with an introduction by the pseudonymous editor Victor Eremita, followed by the despairing aphorisms of the aesthete A, one of which indicates that Kierkegaard has put his mythological studies to use. It reads,

What is it that binds me? From what was the chain formed that bound the Fenris wolf? It was made of the noise of cats' paws walking on the ground, of the beards of women, of the roots of cliffs, of the grass of bears, of the breath of fish, and of the spittle of birds. I, too, am bound in the same way by a chain formed of gloomy fancies, of alarming dreams, of troubled thoughts, of fearful presentiments, of inexplicable anxieties. This chain is "very flexible, soft as silk, yields to the most powerful strain, and cannot be torn apart."<sup>23</sup>

As the Hongs point out, the quotation at the end of the passage above is a modification of Jacob Bærent Møinichen's *Nordiske Folks Overtroe, Guder, Fabler og Helte indtil Frode 7 Tider i Bogstav-Orden* (1800), and the list of materials composing the chain is based on both Grundtvig's *Nordens Mythologi* and Møinichen's book,<sup>24</sup> which was also found in Kierkegaard's library after his death.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Møinichen refers to "Kvinders Skrig" ("cries of women") and "Biørnens Seener" ("sinews of bears"), Grundtvig, much like Kierkegaard after him, describes "Kvinde-Skiæg" ("beards of women") and "Björne-Græs" ("grass of bears").<sup>26</sup> In the 1832 edition of *Nordens Mythologi*, Grundtvig remarks, "I assume namely about *sinum bjarnarins* that it is from *sina* (grass), since it is clear that nothing but *unknown* things should be named here."<sup>27</sup> The reflection of Grundtvig's translation in the aesthete's aphorism would suggest that the Kierke-

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**20** Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, *Nordens Mytologi eller Udsigt over Eddalæren for dannede Mænd der ei selv ere Mytologer*, Copenhagen: J. H. Schubothes Forlag 1808 (ASKB 1948).

**21** Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-Sprog historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Copenhagen: J. H. Schubothes Boghandling 1832 [1808] (ASKB 1949).

**22** Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, *Brage-Snak om Græske og Nordiske Myther og Oldsagn for Damer og Herrer*, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 1844 (ASKB 1548).

**23** SKS 2, 43 / EO1, 34.

**24** EO1, "Explanatory Notes," p. 610.

**25** Jacob Bærent Møinichen, *Nordiske Folks Overtroe, Guder, Fabler og Helte indtil Frode 7 Tider i Bogstav-Orden*, Copenhagen: P. M. Liunge 1800 (ASKB 1947).

**26** EO1, "Explanatory Notes," p. 610.

**27** Grundtvig, *Nordens Mythologi*, p. 519n (my translation).

gaard of *Either/Or* was attentive to Grundtvig's work in the emerging field of Nordic studies, and that Kierkegaard turned to Grundtvig as an authority on Old Norse mythology, a subject in which he, too, seems to have been genuinely interested at this time.

According to Henrike Fürstenberg, both Møinichen and Grundtvig base their work on Snorri's *Prose Edda* (ca. 1220), although Grundtvig departs from the original.<sup>28</sup> She notes that the entire focus of the aphorism is on Gleipnir, the chain that bound the Fenris wolf and likewise binds the aesthete A.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Ragnarök, the apocalypse caused by the freeing of the Fenris wolf, is not on Kierkegaard's horizon,<sup>30</sup> despite the fact that he owned Martin Hammerich's *Om Ragnaroksmithen og dens Betydning i den oldnordiske Religion* (1836).<sup>31</sup> Fürstenberg argues that the aesthete compares the invisible chains that bind him to Gleipnir because "[t]he components are not unreal and paradoxical as such, but as *inner* forces they are intangible and, moreover, qualified as negative."<sup>32</sup>

In 1845, Kierkegaard, in *Stages on Life's Way*, would revisit the image of Gleipnir under the ethical pseudonym Judge William, who had, of course, previously appeared in the second part of *Either/Or*. Whereas the aesthete considered being bound a torment, the ethicist judge finds it a fitting metaphor for his happy marriage. He writes,

But woman is the weaker sex. In the present context, this remark seems to be rather *mal à propos* [misapplied], for she certainly has not manifested herself as such. Indeed, a silk cord can be just as strong as an iron chain, and the chain that bound the Fenris wolf was indeed invisible, was something that did not exist at all—what if it were the same with woman's weakness, that it is an invisible power that expresses its strength in weakness.<sup>33</sup>

The aesthetic and the ethical spheres of existence—as manifested by the aesthete A and Judge William, respectively—are thrown into sharp relief by these

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**28** Henrike Fürstenberg, "The Fenris Wolf: Unreal Fetters and Real Forces in Søren Kierkegaard's Authorship," in *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Tome I, *Agamemnon to Guadaluquivir*, ed. by Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2014 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 16), p. 234.

**29** *Ibid.*, p. 237.

**30** *Ibid.*, p. 234.

**31** Martin Hammerich, *Om Ragnaroksmithen og dens Betydning i den oldnordiske Religion*, Copenhagen: J. D. Quist 1836 (ASKB 1950).

**32** Fürstenberg, "Fenris Wolf," p. 237.

**33** SKS 6, 134 / SL, 142.

dissimilar handlings of the myth of the Fenris wolf and the fetter Gleipnir. While neither treatment considers Gleipnir as a check on the wolf's eschatological telos, they nonetheless differ essentially on what it means to be bound by necessity.

## C Loki and the Death of Balder

In *The Concept of Irony*, after castigating the ironical youth of Germany and France, Kierkegaard writes: "If anyone desires an excellent picture of an ironist who by the very duality of his existence lacked existence, I will call attention to Asa-Loki."<sup>34</sup> According to Matthew Brake, here Kierkegaard references Loki's tendency to alternate between alliances and enmity with the gods. Similarly, the romantic ironist or aesthete is subject to a flux of moods.<sup>35</sup> Kierkegaard could have read about Loki in Møinichen's *Nordiske Folks Overtroe, Guder, Fabler og Helte*.<sup>36</sup> A relevant passage reads, "Loki Laufeiason or Loptur, a very equivocal person, who was counted among the gods, although he was rather a devil or a perfect blending of evil and good. Always in the company of the Aesir, he did them all possible rogueries, but just as often was of use to them, and helped them by his matchless cunning out of many difficulties."<sup>37</sup> I have called attention to this passage from Kierkegaard's dissertation in order to point out that the pseudonym A's fascination with the Norse in *Either/Or* is by no means one of the eccentricities of his character that Kierkegaard offers up for critique—even if it does land A squarely in the camp of the Danish romantics, with whom Kierkegaard had an ambiguous relationship. Instead, the creative analogies that Kierkegaard draws between Sigurd and Hegel, and Asa-Loki and the ironist, under his own name in *The Concept of Irony* demonstrate that the young doctoral candidate was positively influenced by Old Norse literature and mythology.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> SKS 1, 321 / CI, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Brake, "Loki: Romanticism and Kierkegaard's Critique of the Aesthetic," in *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Tome II, *Gulliver to Zerlina*, ed. by Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2015 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 16), p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> CI, "Explanatory Notes," p. 547.

<sup>37</sup> Møinichen, *Nordiske Folks Overtroe*, p. 291 (my translation).

<sup>38</sup> If there is irony in the former analogy, the irony here is clearly directed against Hegel, and not *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Hence, this passage also conforms to my characterization of Kierkegaard's first stage of Old Norse reception as enthusiastic, not ironic.



In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard, in the guise of the aesthete A, returns to the figure of Loki in one of the aphorisms: “How dreadful boredom is—how dreadfully boring...I do not even suffer pain. The vulture pecked continually at Prometheus’s liver; the poison dripped down continually on Loki; it was at least an interruption, even though monotonous.”<sup>39</sup> Loki envied Balder, the most beloved of the Norse gods, for his invulnerability. Thus, he elicited from Frigg, Balder’s mother, the revelation that Balder could be harmed by mistletoe. Balder was killed after Loki had the blind god Hod throw a branch of mistletoe at him.<sup>40</sup> For his culpability in the death of Balder, Loki’s punishment is to be chained to a cliff with a serpent dripping poison on his face. Signe, his wife, holds a bowl over him to catch the poison, but it still falls on his face when she has to empty the bowl.<sup>41</sup> Loki also occupies Kierkegaard in *Stages on Life’s Way*. Here the pseudonym Quidam writes in his diary, while reflecting critically on his engagement: “In fact, my father was married, and he was the most depressed person I have known. But he was calm and happy all day long; and, like Loki’s wife used an evening hour to drain the bowl of bitterness, and thus he was healed again.”<sup>42</sup> Like Judge William in the same book, Quidam employs Norse mythology to vividly illustrate everyday life.

Judge William also alludes to the death of Balder in attempting to win over the aesthete A to the ethical existence of marriage in the second part of *Either/Or*.<sup>43</sup> He writes in a letter to his recalcitrant young friend,

This need, then, you do not have, the need to let love transfigure itself in a higher sphere, or, more correctly—for the first love does not have the need but does it spontaneously—you do have the need but refuse to satisfy it. If I now turn back momentarily to your imaginary first love, I would say: Perhaps you did succeed in invoking all the powers, and yet there grew a mistletoe nearby.<sup>44</sup>

Here the judge suggests that A’s love is endangered because it is immediate and not transfigured by the ethical sphere. Mistletoe, as the cause of Balder’s downfall, is a fitting symbol for the febrile weakness of the aesthete’s love. According to the judge, this mistletoe

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<sup>39</sup> SKS 2, 46 / EO1, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Brake, “Loki,” p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> EO2, “Explanatory Notes,” p. 611.

<sup>42</sup> SKS 6, 184 f. / SL, 197.

<sup>43</sup> EO2, “Explanatory Notes,” p. 474.

<sup>44</sup> SKS 3, 62 / EO2, 56.

shot up, wafted coolness upon you, and yet it hid within itself a deeper warmth, and you both rejoiced in it. But this mistletoe is a sign of the feverish restlessness that is the life principle of your love; it cools off and heats up, is continually changing—indeed, you could simultaneously wish that the two of you might have an eternity before you and that this present instant might be the last—and therefore the death of your love is certain.<sup>45</sup>

Like Balder, romantic love has its demise immanently grounded within it, in that it must subsist on the very fires that will eventually consume it. Marital love, on the other hand, is characterized by its enduring constancy, at least according to the judge's ideal.

## D Thor

As with his treatment of Loki, Kierkegaard's engagement with the god Thor in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* also demonstrates a significant familiarity with Snorri's *Edda*. A's first essay following the *Diapsalmata*, entitled "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic," is famous for its encomium to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). Somewhat anachronistically, the aesthete surveys the composer's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) as preliminary stages to what he considers to be Mozart's greatest work. Of the stage represented by *Le nozze di Figaro*, he writes,

Although desire in this stage is not qualified as desire, although this intimated desire is altogether vague about its object, it nevertheless has one qualification—it is infinitely deep. Like Thor, it sucks through a horn, the tip of which rests in the ocean; but the reason that it cannot suck its object to itself is not that the object is infinite, but that this infinity cannot become an object for it. Thus the sucking [*Sugen*] does not indicate a relation to the object but is identical with its sighing [*Suk*] and this is infinitely deep.<sup>46</sup>

The Hongs state that this passage refers to a drinking contest between Thor and Loki, in which Loki connected Thor's drinking horn to the ocean,<sup>47</sup> but, as the reader of Snorri's *Edda* knows, it is the giant Utgarda-Loki (not Asa-Loki or, simply, Loki) who initiates the competition and plays this trick on Thor.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> SKS 3, 62 / EO2, 56f.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 2, 82f. / EO1, 77.

<sup>47</sup> EO1, "Explanatory Notes," p. 618.

<sup>48</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, trans. and ed. by Jesse L. Byock, New York: Penguin Books 2005, pp. 57–63.

Thor's hammer, named Mjollnir,<sup>49</sup> is likened by its mythological properties to recollection in the pseudonym William Afham's meditation on the concept in the preface to the "*In Vino Veritas*" episode of *Stages on Life's Way*: "What is recollected can be thrown away, but just like Thor's hammer, it returns, and not only that, like a dove it has a longing for the recollection, yes, like a dove, however often it is sold, that can never belong to anyone else because it always flies home."<sup>50</sup> Here Thor's hammer seems to function as part of an imperfect simile with recollection—imperfect because Kierkegaard homes in on a more fitting analogy between recollection and a dove in the same sentence. Nevertheless, by choosing to retain the reference to Mjollnir, Kierkegaard demonstrates his continued enthusiasm for Old Norse mythology through 1845.

## E Valhalla

Tellingly, in *Either/Or* Judge William again draws from Norse mythology when he seeks to depict marital love, thus foregrounding its distinction from its romantic counterpart. He tells the aesthete,

Marital love, just as first love, knows full well that all these obstacles are conquered in the infinite moment of love. But it also knows, and this is precisely the historical in it, that this victory wills to be gained, and that this gaining is not just a game but also a struggle, yet also not just a struggle but also a game, just as the battle in Valhalla was a struggle to the death, and yet a game, for the warriors always rose up again, rejuvenated by death.<sup>51</sup>

In Snorri's *Edda*, Valhalla is the destination for warriors who have died fighting. Here they meet Odin, who entertains them lavishly. Battles are conducted daily as diversions between bouts of feasting and drinking.<sup>52</sup> By employing the rites of Valhalla as a metaphor for marital love in its deathlessness, Judge William draws a sharp distinction between it and romantic love, which he had previously associated with Balder, who was killed by a mere sprig of mistletoe.

Moreover, it could be argued that Kierkegaard is also contrasting a healthier—indeed, undying—Scandinavian romanticism with its undead British counterpart. Specifically, I refer here to *Either/Or*'s "The Unhappiest One" and "The Seducer's Diary." "The Unhappiest One" begins: "As is well known, there is said to be a grave somewhere in England that is distinguished not by a magnif-

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32ff.

<sup>50</sup> *SKS* 6, 20 / *SL*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> *SKS* 3, 112f. / *EO2*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, pp. 46–50.

icent monument or a mournful setting but by a short inscription—‘The Unhappiest One.’ It is said that the grave was opened, but no trace of a corpse was found.”<sup>53</sup> Kierkegaard’s pseudonym A is referring to an actual tomb in Worcester Cathedral that reads “Miserrimus” (“the most pitiable”).<sup>54</sup> This inscription, coupled with the absence of a body, leads him to wonder, “Has he perhaps risen from the dead...Did he find no rest, not even in the grave; is he perhaps still fitfully wandering over the earth[?]”<sup>55</sup> A thus channels the ghoulishness of certain strains of British romanticism in “The Unhappiest One,” as will be elaborated further below.

Whether “The Seducer’s Diary” is authored by A or not remains an open question, but, in any case, “The Unhappiest One” and its revenant anticipate the eponymous character of the novella, who has been described as a Byronic vampire.<sup>56</sup> Kierkegaard owned a German translation of Byron’s complete works,<sup>57</sup> which contained a rendering of “A Fragment,”<sup>58</sup> the Ur-text of the first modern vampire story, John William Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819). Polidori was Byron’s erstwhile personal physician, and he based his tale on Byron’s abortive attempt to enter the ghost story competition held at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816, which would later be published as “A Fragment.” Strangely enough, Polidori’s *Vampyre* text eventually circulated in England, where it was published without his consent and attributed to Byron. Unlike the vampires of folklore, who were mindless ghouls, Polidori’s vampire was an autonomous being who manifested the Byronic qualities of nobility, mobility, and seductiveness, as it had been Polidori’s intent to caricature his former employer.<sup>59</sup> In the creation of Johannes the Seducer, Kierkegaard became just

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<sup>53</sup> SKS 2, 213 / *EOI*, 219.

<sup>54</sup> *EOI*, “Explanatory Notes,” p. 633.

<sup>55</sup> SKS 2, 213 / *EOI*, 219.

<sup>56</sup> While other critics have noted Johannes the Seducer’s vampiric qualities, Bartholomew Ryan is the first (to my knowledge) to link him to Byron in this respect. Ryan, however, does not amplify on how the history of the modern vampire—and its inextricable connection to Byronism—makes such an association possible in the first place. See Bartholomew Ryan, “Lord George Gordon Byron: Seduction, Defiance, and Despair in the Works of Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions*, Tome III, *Literature, Drama and Music*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 5), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> [George Gordon Byron], *Lord Byrons sämtliche Werke. Nach den Anforderungen unserer Zeit neu übersetzt von Mehreren*, vols. 1–10, Stuttgart: Hoffman’sche Verlag-Buchhandlung 1839 (ASKB 1868–1870).

<sup>58</sup> Byron, “Ein Fragment,” in *Werke*, vol. 7, pp. 142–148.

<sup>59</sup> D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, “Introduction,” in *The Vampyre: A Tale, and Ernestus Berchtold; or, the Modern Oedipus*, Peterborough: Broadview 2008, pp. 10–15.

one of many nineteenth-century authors to be profoundly influenced by this modern, inherently Byronic, vampire.

The Seducer and Judge William represent, of course, the antipodes of the aesthetic and the ethical, respectively. It is interesting, then, to note that the former seems not only to read Byron but to live Byronically,<sup>60</sup> while the latter appears to draw more of his inspiration from national or regional romanticism.<sup>61</sup> But what is more, in *Either/Or*, British romanticism, and Byronism in particular, is associated with the undead, whereas Scandinavian romanticism, as indicated by Judge William's Valhalla metaphor, is characterized by deathlessness. As we know, Kierkegaard is ambivalent towards both the aesthetic and the ethical positions, but in this case a wholesome national romanticism seems to be favored over a decadent import.

## F Echo

In his doctoral dissertation, Kierkegaard contrasted the world of Greek mythology with its Nordic counterpart:

In happy Greece, nature seldom witnessed anything but the soft and gentle harmonies of an even-tempered psyche, for even Greek sorrow was beautiful, and therefore Echo was a friendly nymph. But in Norse mythology, where nature resounded with wild lament, where the night was not light and clear but dark and foggy, full of anxiety and terror, where grief was assuaged not by a quiet recollection but by a deep sigh and everlasting oblivion, Echo was a troll. Thus in Norse mythology, Echo is called *Dvergmaal* or *Bergmaal* (see Grimm, *Irische Elfenmärchen*, p. LXXVIII; *Færoiske Qvæder* [Randers: 1822], p. 464).<sup>62</sup>

The question of the superiority (or inferiority) of Norse mythology vis-à-vis the classical was one that had occupied the Golden Age intelligentsia since the period's beginning. In 1800, the topic for the University of Copenhagen's essay prize competition was announced: "Would it be fruitful for poetry in Scandinavia if ancient Norse mythology were to be introduced and commonly accepted by our poets as an alternative to Greek mythology?" The winning essay answered in the negative, but Oehlenschläger, who took second place, affirmed that it would.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ryan, "Byron," p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Judge Wilhelm also reads Byron, but only to cite him disapprovingly. See SKS 3, 31 / EO2, 22; SKS 3, 48 / EO2, 41.

<sup>62</sup> SKS 1, 293 f.n / CI, 255n.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth, "The Norse Muse: Report from an International Research Project," *Alvíssmál*, vol. 9, 1999, p. 21.

Kierkegaard seems to conclude that only the Scandinavian mythos is attuned to “[t]his irony in nature,”<sup>64</sup> which would imply that it has an advantage over the Greek in one sense. Anticipating *The Concept of Anxiety*’s notion of “objective anxiety,”<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard, in a Grundtvigian move, concatenates the Nordic worldview with the Christian, claiming “only the humorous individual actually perceives it [the irony in nature], since it is actually only through the contemplation of *sin* in the world that the ironic interpretation of nature really emerges.”<sup>66</sup>

Kierkegaard refers his reader to the introduction to the Brothers Grimm’s 1826 translation of Thomas Crofton Croker’s *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), which was found in his library at the time of his death.<sup>67</sup> Here the Grimms write,

The *Edda* attributes to the elves a language different from that of the gods, men, and giants, whose expressions for the greatest natural phenomena are recorded in *Alvissmál*, roughly the same way in which Homer distinguishes between divine and human names in several places. It is remarkable that the echo is named *Dvergmál* or *Bergmál* (i.e., dwarf-language or mountain-language) in Nordic popular belief.<sup>68</sup>

It is difficult to see where Kierkegaard gets the idea that Echo is hence a troll—or in itself in any way personified—from this passage. One might then consult *Færøiske Qvæder om Sigurd Fofnersbane og hans Æt* (1822), which the Grimms also cite,<sup>69</sup> and Kierkegaard himself owned.<sup>70</sup> (Incidentally, these lays would appear to draw from the same legendary material as *The Saga of the Volsungs*.) Although there is no evidence that Kierkegaard read Faroese or its cognate, modern Icelandic, he nonetheless refers here to a stanza of the original language:

*Tajr högga tujt tajr lujva lujt,  
Tajr trua Jör tiil Kolva,*

<sup>64</sup> SKS 1, 293n / CI, 255n.

<sup>65</sup> SKS 4, 361–365 / CA, 56–60.

<sup>66</sup> SKS 1, 294n / CI, 255n.

<sup>67</sup> *Irische Elfenmärchen*, trans. by the Brothers [Jacob and Wilhelm] Grimm, Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer 1826 (ASKB 1423).

<sup>68</sup> The Brothers [Jacob and Wilhelm] Grimm, “Einleitung ueber die Elfen,” in *Irische Elfenmärchen*, p. LXXVIII (my translation).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LXXVIII.

<sup>70</sup> *Færøiske Qvæder om Sigurd Fofnersbane og hans Æt. Med et Anhang*, collected and trans. by Hans Christian Lyngbye, with an introduction by Peter Erasmus Müller, Randers: S. Elmenhoff kgl. priv. Bogtrykker 1822 (ASKB 1484).

*Dvörgamaal sang uj qvörjun Hamri,  
Vörildin touk eât skjelva.*<sup>71</sup>

Since Kierkegaard may have recognized only the word *Dvörgamaal* (i.e., *Dvergmâl*) in the passage above, it will be more fruitful to consider the Danish translation on the following page, which reads:

They hew often, and spare little,  
And trample down the earth.  
The echo resounded from every mountain,  
And the whole earth trembled.<sup>72</sup>

Again, there is nothing here to suggest that Echo is personified as a troll in Nordic mythology. Whether Kierkegaard could not be bothered to look up what he had read in the Grimms and Lyngbye and thus carelessly misremembered it, or decided to play fast and loose with the facts, this passage of the dissertation conforms to the image of its author as an ironist of academia; and although it shows Kierkegaard to be no punctilious scholar of Norse myth, it does indicate an imaginative enthusiasm for his region's folklore.

## G Høgne

In his essay "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama," the pseudonym A writes: "Anxiety, therefore, belongs essentially to the tragic. Hamlet is such a tragic figure because he suspects his mother's crime. Robert le diable asks how it could happen that he does so much evil. Høgne, whom his mother had conceived with a troll, accidentally comes to see his image in the water and asks his mother whence his body acquired such a form."<sup>73</sup> Kierkegaard would have read of this story in one of the seminal *Nordiske Kæmpe-Historier efter Islandske Haandskrifter* translated by Carl Christian Rafn, namely *Sagaen om Kong Didrik af Bern og hans Kæmper*:

A king, by the name of Aldrian, ruled over Nibelungland, and was a powerful king. His wife was a princess. It happened one day, just as the king was not home, that she was drunk on wine and had laid herself to sleep out in her garden. Then a man came there and laid with her. When she awoke, it seemed to her as if it were King Aldrian, but before she checked for

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 465 (my translation).

<sup>73</sup> SKS 2, 154 / EO1, 155.

herself, the man suddenly disappeared before her eyes. After some time passed, she felt herself to be pregnant, and before she was confined, it happened once when she was alone that the same man came to her, and now he told her what had happened in their first meeting, and that she was pregnant and had a child by him, but he passed himself off as an elf. “And if the child lives and grows up,” he added, “then you shall inform him about his paternal lineage, but otherwise keep this hidden from everyone else; and if it is a boy, as I suspect, then this boy will grow up to be a formidable man, and he will often get into trouble, but every time it goes so far with him that he cannot save himself, then he shall call on his father.” And with that the elf disappeared. Some time afterwards the queen gave birth to a boy, and he was called Høgne, and was regarded as King Aldrian’s son. When he was five winters old, he went and played with the other boys, and he was hard and strong and bad to come to grips with, and now he was rejected because he looked like a troll and not a person, and his countenance resembled his mind. At this he became very angry, and went to the water in order to see his image. Then he saw that his face was pale as basswood and sickly as the color of ash, and it was large and terrible. He went now to his mother and asked her from where his body had gotten such a form. Then she told him the truth about his father.<sup>74</sup>

As numerous commentators have pointed out, Kierkegaard inhabits the role of the modern Antigone in this essay, in that between him and his beloved stands a dark familial secret, namely Michael Kierkegaard’s impregnation of the maid—who would, of course, soon become his wife—Ane Sørensdatter Lund. Like Antigone, Kierkegaard is wracked with an ontological anxiety, as he suspects his very origins to have been founded on a crime. In his ambivalent (at best) relation to his own body, Kierkegaard perhaps identifies with the Høgne of *Sagaen om Kong Didrik af Bern og hans Kæmper*, who must attribute his existence to his elf-father’s rape of his mother. The extent of Kierkegaard’s saturation in Norse legend and lore is evident here, as he sets out to describe the inner stage of modern tragedy, first citing Hamlet, the *ne plus ultra* of modern tragic figures, but then finding an apt externalization of this inward anxiety in Rafn’s medieval *Nordiske Kæmpe-Historier: Høgne*, whose “countenance resembled his mind.”

## H Heimskringla

In the essay “The First Love,” A offers a flattering review of the play *Les Premières Amours ou Les Souvenirs d’enfance* (translated by J. L. Heiberg as *Den første Kjærlighed*) by the then-ubiquitous Augustin Eugène Scribe. In the

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<sup>74</sup> *Sagaen om Kong Didrik af Bern og hans Kæmper*, in *Nordiske Kæmpe-Historier*, vol. 2, pp. 241 f. (my translation).



play, the young Emmeline has set her heart on her cousin Charles, despite not having seen him since their childhood. They meet again as young adults: “Charles begins the story about Pamela; she listens calmly. Now comes the terrible thing—that he is married; there burst the kingdom of Norway.”<sup>75</sup> The Hongs recognize this line from *Kong Olaf Tryggvesøns Saga*,<sup>76</sup> which was originally part of Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, a compendium of the biographies of the Norse kings. Kierkegaard owned a collection that included this saga, namely Carl Christian Rafn’s translations of *Oldnordiske Sagaer efter den af det nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab udgivne Grundskrift*.<sup>77</sup> In a naval battle between King Olaf’s Norwegian fleet and the combined forces of the Swedes, the Danes, and the Norwegian rebels, Erik the Jarl instructs a supposed Finn to shoot King Olaf’s powerful bowman Einar Tamberskælver: “The Finn then shot an arrow, which hit in the middle of Einar’s bow as he stretched it the hardest for the third time. The bow went to pieces with a loud peal. Then King Olaf said, ‘What burst there so loudly?’ ‘Norway from your hand, King!’ replied Einar.”<sup>78</sup> On one hand, it seems that the pseudonym A is ironizing at Emmeline’s expense; with this ludicrous analogy, her personal disappointment is made to appear nearly irrelevant in comparison to the loss of the kingdom of Norway. On the other hand, one might surmise that Kierkegaard, beneath the pseudonymous guise, could be urging his reader to recognize that everyday life can have a pathos equaling that of world-historical events. The former reading conforms to what we know about A’s dubious character, while the latter follows the main thrust of the Kierkegaardian authorship, as dedicated to “the single individual.” Again, Kierkegaard’s immersion in Old Norse literature is apparent in that he reflects back on the sagas even when writing about a French parlor drama.

## I Frey’s Boar and Frithiof

Under the pseudonym Nicolaus Notabene, Kierkegaard makes yet another reference to Norse mythology in the underappreciated *Prefaces* (1844): “In the

<sup>75</sup> SKS 2, 267 / EO1, 275.

<sup>76</sup> EO1, “Explanatory Notes,” p. 640.

<sup>77</sup> *Oldnordiske Sagaer efter den af det nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab udgivne Grundskrift*, vols. 1–12, trans. by Carl Christian Rafn, Copenhagen: Popske Bogtrykkeri [vols. 1–3], Andreas Seidelin [vols. 4–12] 1826–37 (ASKB 1996–2007).

<sup>78</sup> [Snorri Sturluson], *Kong Olaf Tryggvesøns Saga*, in *Oldnordiske Sagaer*, vol. 2, p. 283 (my translation).

literary world it is the custom to make a sacred vow. The ceremony is not definitely prescribed. In ancient times, as is well known, one swore by Frey's boar."<sup>79</sup> According to Snorri, "Frey is the most splendid of the gods. He controls the rain and the shining of the sun, and through them the bounty of the earth. It is good to invoke him for peace and abundance. He also determines men's success in prosperity."<sup>80</sup> This perhaps explains why one would swear by his boar. En route to Balder's cremation, "Frey," writes Snorri, "rode in his chariot. It was drawn by the boar called Gold Bristle or Sheathed Tooth."<sup>81</sup> A gift to Frey from the dwarves, the creature's name in the Old Norse is "Gullin-bursti."<sup>82</sup> Kierkegaard could have learned of this practice of swearing by Frey's boar from Esaias Tegnér's *Frithiofs Saga* (1825), a loose adaptation into Swedish verse of a now-obscure Old Norse legendary saga. After King Ring has married the hero Frithiof's beloved Ingeborg, the ancient monarch pledges himself to a boar in the name of Frey (and those of other gods in the Norse pantheon):

He touched the boar's forehead and thus made the vow:  
 "I swear to defeat Frithiof, though he is a great warrior,  
 Let Frey and Odin help the strong Thor!"<sup>83</sup>

Although there is no record of *Frithiofs Saga* having been in his library, Kierkegaard apparently references the illustrations on the title pages of early editions of the book in *The Concept of Anxiety*,<sup>84</sup> which, incidentally, was published on the same day as *Prefaces* (17 June 1844).

The pseudonymous author of *Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis writes,

"The moment" is a figurative expression, and therefore it is not easy to deal with. However, it is a beautiful word to consider. Nothing is as swift as a blink of the eye, and yet it is commensurable with the content of the eternal. Thus when Ingeborg looks out over the sea after Frithiof, this is a picture of what is expressed in the figurative word. An outburst of her emotion, a sigh or a word, already has as a sound more of the determination of time and is more present as something that is vanishing and does not have in it so much of the presence of the eternal. For this reason a sigh, a word, etc. have power to relieve the soul of the burdensome weight, precisely because the burden, when merely expressed, already

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<sup>79</sup> SKS 4, 478 / P, 14.

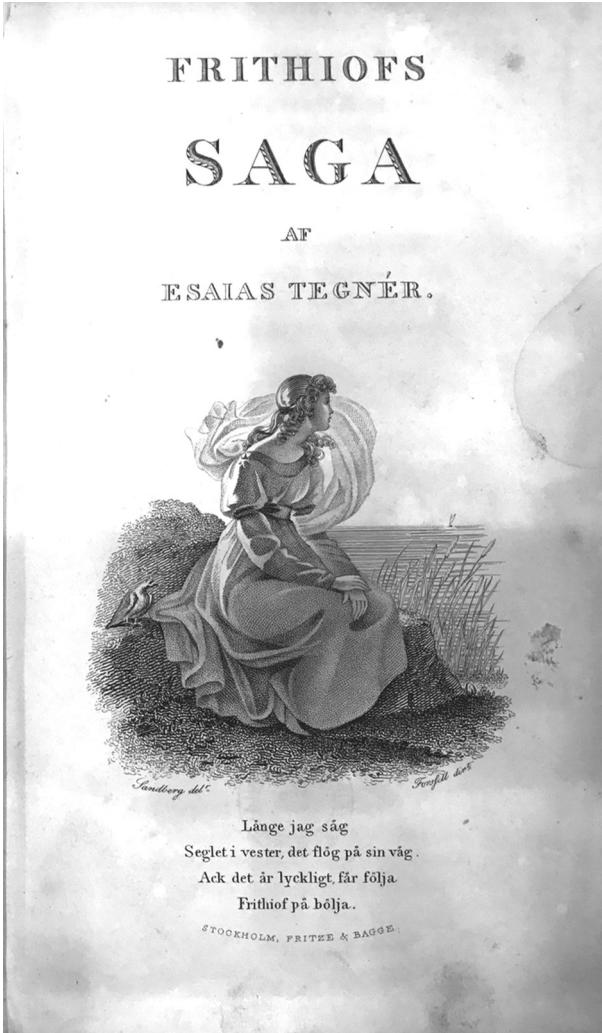
<sup>80</sup> Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, p. 35.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>82</sup> P, "Explanatory Notes," p. 174.

<sup>83</sup> Esaias Tegnér, *Frithiofs Saga*, Stockholm: Fritze & Bagge [1840], pp. 127f. (my translation).

<sup>84</sup> CA, "Explanatory Notes," p. 245.



Title page of Esaias Tegnér's *Frithiofs Saga*, Stockholm: Fritze & Bagge [1840]. Reproduced courtesy of The Royal Library.

begins to become something of the past. A blink is therefore a designation of time, but mark well, of time in the fateful conflict when it is touched by eternity.<sup>85</sup>

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85 SKS 4, 390f. / CA, 87.

Here Kierkegaard articulates one of his most fundamental metaphysical concepts: “the moment.” Like the German *Augenblick*, the Danish *Øieblikket* “(the moment) is figurative in the sense that it is derived from *Øiets Blik* (a blink of the eye).”<sup>86</sup> Kierkegaard finds a poignant illustration of the moment’s contact with eternity on the title page of *Frithiofs Saga*. By resisting the temptation to give vent to her grief, Ingeborg retains her burden, remaining within the pain of the moment rather than consigning it to the past. Her willingness to pine for Frithiof gives her love the stamp of eternity. Along with the Antigone of *Either/Or*, Ingeborg represents for Kierkegaard yet another unhappy lover, whose necessary silence is reflected in the infinite negativity of the pseudonyms. So, although Tegnér’s ahistorical *Frithiofs Saga* may be questionable at best as an anthropological source, we nonetheless find Kierkegaard combing it for examples of Norse custom in *Prefaces*. And, in its companion work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, the iconic title page image of *Frithiofs Saga* is appropriated to illustrate the concept of the moment.

## II Grundtvig’s Reception of Old Norse

Before investigating Kierkegaard’s subsequent ironical reception of Old Norse mythology and literature, I will briefly survey Grundtvig’s enthusiastic reception of the same. Although Grundtvig’s life has been divided by scholars into three distinct stages, a passionate interest in Old Norse mythology and literature remains a constant throughout. The first stage (1803–10), in fact, is marked above all by the young pastor’s romantic fascination with pagan mythology, particularly of the Norse variety. Somewhat at odds with his clerical vocation, the Grundtvig of this period yearned for a primitive mythos “that was not necessarily Christian.” In the second stage (1811–30), Grundtvig makes and propagates what is known as his “*mageløse opdagelse*” (“matchless discovery”), his redefinition of the true Church in terms of—instead of scripture—the oral recitation of the Apostles’ creed. The third stage is characterized by increased political activity on the part of Grundtvig, as he sided with the reformists of 1848, and opposed Prussia’s annexation of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, as well as German cultural imperialism in Denmark more generally. It was in this stage that Grundtvig insisted upon the necessity of first becoming human before becoming Christian, and to be human for Grundtvig meant to turn

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<sup>86</sup> CA, “Explanatory Notes,” p. 245.

away from individualism,<sup>87</sup> a doctrine that runs directly counter to Kierkegaard. Instead, Grundtvig insisted that any man who conceived of himself outside of national categories was an abstraction. For Grundtvig, groups—especially national groups—related to God just as individuals did. Accordingly, the success of each nation, whether success be defined by military victories, financial windfalls or cultural achievements, was a direct expression of its righteousness before God.<sup>88</sup>

According to Stephen Backhouse, “[i]t is not an exaggeration to call Grundtvig’s theology ‘nationalistic.’ Nationalism is not an afterthought or an addendum to Grundtvig’s theology, it is integral to it, and Grundtvig’s concern to foster national identity has rightly been described as ‘the crimson thread’ that runs throughout the span of his writings.”<sup>89</sup> As Grundtvig perceived it, the Norse nation was to assume to a leading role in world history in accordance with God’s will.<sup>90</sup> Although he includes the Norwegians and Swedes in his conception of “Norse,” as well as, on occasion, the Anglo-Saxons or English, he affords the Danes pride of place in the North and makes no distinction between Norse culture and the national culture of Denmark.<sup>91</sup> As per the “matchless discovery,” Grundtvig preferred the living word to the dead letter because he believed oral transmission to be better for communicating spirit. By spirit, he meant not just the Holy Spirit but the folk-spirit, as well; indeed, Grundtvig often conflates the two. In the transmission of the Apostles’ Creed in the vernacular, the Holy Spirit comes into contact with the spirit of the people. Since these two spirits have a symbiotic relationship, Grundtvig holds heathenism in high regard, considering it anthropologically (but not theologically) as a prefiguration of Christianity. As Grundtvig does in his *Nordens Mythologi*, mythology is to be studied as a step towards defining a people’s essence, as this essence determines their world-historical task in the present.<sup>92</sup>

It is thus important to distinguish, as Backhouse does, between the patriotic Christianity of H. L. Martensen, in which the Church is an inextricable component of the modern state, and the nationalistic Christianity of Grundtvig,

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**87** Stephen Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Christian Nationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, pp. 67f.

**88** *Ibid.*, p. 90.

**89** *Ibid.*, p. 68.

**90** *Ibid.*, p. 6n.

**91** *Ibid.*, p. 81n.

**92** Anders Holm, “Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig: The Matchless Giant,” in *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries*, Tome II, *Theology*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2009 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 7), pp. 106f.

in which a “People’s Church” would exist as an organic offshoot of Norse culture but be independent of the state’s strictures.<sup>93</sup> Grundtvig’s long-held vision of this Church is made manifest in a poem he wrote in 1854–55 entitled *Christenhedens Syvstjerne*. In reference to the seven churches of Revelation, the poem charts Christianity’s progress through a series of historical congregations (“Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, German, and Scandinavian”) with each dominating for a period of 300 years. Grundtvig believed that in his present age the Nordic Church would become preeminent and define modern Christianity as the religion’s supreme manifestation before the Indian Church ushered in its final stage.<sup>94</sup> Inspired by Herder,<sup>95</sup> and the German national romanticism of the late Fichte of *Reden an die Deutsche Nation* (1806),<sup>96</sup> Grundtvig’s Nordic national romanticism led him into the political realm, where he took a stance in defense of the folk-spirit against what he perceived as German incursions into Danish territory and culture. Unlike Kierkegaard, who, as we shall see, austere distanced himself from Norse mythology once his authorship took a religious turn, Grundtvig happily reconciled his Nordic anthropology with his Christian faith, treating the former as a primitive portent of the latter.

### III The *Postscript*: Kierkegaard’s Ironic Reception of Old Norse

Kierkegaard’s ahistorical conception of Christianity would impel him towards an open conflict with Grundtvig in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, one which would forever determine Kierkegaard’s reception of Old Norse culture. To reiterate, Grundtvig had in his *Nordens Mythologi* lauded myth as an expression of the spiritual ideals of the people, which pointed towards and existed on a continuum with Christianity, thus annulling the distinction between the folk-spirit and the Holy Spirit.<sup>97</sup> Whereas Grundtvig emphasized the congruity between human life and Christian life, Kierkegaard, on the other hand, stressed

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<sup>93</sup> Backhouse, *Kierkegaard’s Critique*, pp. 56f.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87f.

<sup>95</sup> Johannes Adamsen, “Herder og Grundtvig—sonderinger,” *Grundtvig Studier*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2001, p. 167.

<sup>96</sup> Per Øhrgaard, “Fichte and Grundtvig as Educators of the People,” in *Building the Nation: N. F. S. Grundtvig and Danish National Identity*, ed. by John A. Hall, Ove Korsgaard, and Ove K. Pedersen, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2015, p. 213.

<sup>97</sup> Holm, “Grundtvig,” pp. 106f.

their absolute incommensurability in the superhuman demand of *imitatio Christi*,<sup>98</sup> especially after the *Postscript* in *Practice in Christianity* (1850).

Kierkegaard replies to Grundtvig's *Nordens Mythologi* in one of his many ironical jabs as the pseudonym Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*.<sup>99</sup> Grundtvig writes that the contemporary Greeks are "punished hard and deeply bowed down under the Roman yoke and the Turkish scourge,"<sup>100</sup> which recalls for him the battle between the Lapiths and the centaurs. In respect to the Lapiths, Grundtvig points out "that it was the Nordic merman at Pylos who was the decisive factor for their liberation," which the author freely interprets as an "omen for a Nordic-Greek period in civil society."<sup>101</sup> The Danes, Grundtvig concludes, "turned so far up towards the North because they would rather bury themselves in the waves than bow under the Roman yoke."<sup>102</sup>

In the guise of Climacus, Kierkegaard summarizes Grundtvig's nationalistic ecclesiology as follows, and renders a damning verdict of it:

The Church theory assumes that we are Christians, but now we must in a purely objective way have it made sure what the essentially Christian is in order to defend ourselves against the Turk and the Russian and the Roman yoke, and valiantly battle Christianity forward by having our age form a bridge, as it were, to a matchless future, which is already glimpsed. This is sheer estheticism.<sup>103</sup>

Here Kierkegaard bristles at Grundtvig's objective, nationalistic brand of Christianity, which, for the philosopher, is but a pale imitation of the authentic faith inherent in the single individual, whether that individual is the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling*, the Quidam of *Stages on Life's Way*, or the parson of *Either/Or*. Kierkegaard describes Grundtvigian Christianity as "estheticism," a term which smacks of the immature, the pleasure-seeking, and the shallow. While Grundtvig attempts to cow his audience into accepting a peculiarly Danish definition of Christianity through his world-historical bluster, Kierkegaard, behind the masks of his pseudonyms, whispers seductively into his reader's ear, gently performing his authorial maieutic. Climacus, for one, effectively snips the umbilical cord between the Christian and the state, offering a strongly subjective definition of Christianity: "Christianity is an existence communication. The task is to become Christian or to continue to be a Christian, and

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**98** *Ibid.*, p. 111.

**99** *CUP2*, "Explanatory Notes," p. 270.

**100** Grundtvig, *Nordens Mythologi*, p. 45 (my translation).

**101** *Ibid.* (my translation).

**102** *Ibid.*, pp. 45 f. (my translation).

**103** *SKS* 7, 552 / *CUP1*, 608.

the most dangerous illusion of all is to become so sure of being one that all Christendom must be defended against the Turk—instead of defending the faith within oneself against the illusion about the Turk.”<sup>104</sup>

As I hinted earlier, Kierkegaard’s engagement with Old Norse mythology and literature would be all too brief. From 1846 until his death in 1855, Kierkegaard apparently makes no direct references to Old Norse sagas or mythology in his published works. Since Norse culture functioned as a sort of substratum for Grundtvigian Christianity, it is unsurprising that Kierkegaard no longer turns to it for inspiration after his collision with Grundtvig in the *Postscript*, nor does the *Postscript* itself contain any explicit references to Norse texts. There is, however, one veiled allusion that recurs in the tome. Kierkegaard *qua* Climacus writes: “[W]hat in truth all this is that is said about Grundtvig is highly dubious, that he is a seer, bard, skald, prophet, with an almost matchless outlook upon world history and with one eye for the profound.”<sup>105</sup> Although Kierkegaard only refers to Grundtvig by name in this one section of the *Postscript*, he evokes him implicitly at another point in the text with the words “one deep and one blue eye.”<sup>106</sup> Kierkegaard thus sarcastically likens Grundtvig to Odin, foremost of the Æsir, who forfeited an eye in exchange for wisdom in Snorri’s *Edda*.<sup>107</sup> This allusion to Norse mythology would suggest that Grundtvig—and not Hegel—is the primary, if not exclusive, target of Kierkegaard’s polemic in the section to which I refer.<sup>108</sup> In any case, the passage quoted beforehand, with its explicit mention of Grundtvig and its mocking reference to “one eye for the profound”—in addition to the inclusion of the word *Skjald*, which means “poet” in Old Norse,<sup>109</sup> in Climacus’ catalogue of Grundtvig’s attributes—is enough to demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s reception of Norse mythology and literature had finally turned ironical before ceasing altogether.

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**104** SKS 7, 552 / CUP1, 608.

**105** SKS 7, 52 / CUP1, 46.

**106** SKS 7, 134 f. / CUP1, 144.

**107** Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, p. 113.

**108** Cf. Holm, “Grundtvig,” p. 123.

**109** “Skjald,” in *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, (<http://ordnet.dk/ods/ordbog?select=Skjald,1&query=Skjald>) (11/12/2017).