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# From the Papers of One Still Living: Kierkegaard and British Literature, 1932-1995

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# Acknowledgments

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– Asher Gelzer-Govatos, Washington University in St. Louis, May 2020

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Professor Vincent Sherry, Chair

This dissertation traces the impact of the life, work, and thought of the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard on British authors of the mid-twentieth century. Following the translation of Kierkegaard's writings into English in the mid-1930s, British intellectual life underwent a Kierkegaard boom, but Kierkegaard's impact lingered long after his initial introduction in the build up to World War II. In sketching Kierkegaard's importance to a handful of midcentury authors – Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Flann O'Brien, W.H. Auden, and R.S. Thomas – I show that Kierkegaard remained connected to a sense of "crisis" in British life, even after the abatement of the crisis of war. Tying these various crises to shifts in British life, I show the significance for these authors in pursing a form of literature that I dub the "maieutic," a term used by Kierkegaard to denote the work of a midwife in indirectly bringing about the birth of truth in individuals. After unpacking "maieutic literature" in the body chapters, I trace its decline in the epilog, showing how the midcentury interest in Kierkegaard as a resource for developing individual readers gave way to a reading of Kierkegaard indebted to therapeutic practice, a use which emphasized self-revelation and acceptance over ethical or religious growth.

# Introduction: Preface(s) – Kierkegaard in Britain

> *If this were my last word, I know it is the truth in me: Everyone* who really wills something *will always find an admirer in me, or if necessary, support; -- but these fools, the masses, the whole conglomeration of men and women who only want to waste their lives and other people's lives: they will find their match in me* – 1846 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[1]

In 1932 T.S. Eliot faced a difficult decision. In his professional role as editor for Faber and Faber, he received a proposal from T.F. Burns, of the Catholic publishing house Sheed and Ward, that Faber and Faber consider releasing a series of English translations of the work of the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Eliot expressed hesitation in his initial response to Burns, noting that "Some of us talked of the matter some time ago and came to the conclusion that it was not likely to be a success."[2] Doing his due diligence, however, Eliot wrote to Herbert Read, his main assistant in publishing his little magazine the *Criterion*, seeking Read's advice on the matter, since Read was one of the first Englishmen to read Kierkegaard's works in their German translations. Read replied enthusiastically, comparing Kierkegaard to Pascal in terms of importance, and strongly encouraged Eliot to push for publication.[3] This prompted Eliot to respond positively to Burns, promising that "We are… quite seriously, going into the question of Kierkegaard."[4] Despite this promise, the proposal fizzled, and Faber and

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alec Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 167.
[2] T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot Vol. VI: 1932-33*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 315.
[3] In his response to Eliot, Read writes: "The more I know about him the more I want to know, and I feel pretty sure he is the most important writer of his kind still to be translated into English. And the tide is with him… I think in a way it is a good enterprise for an English publisher. There is not the slightest doubt of his permanent value: I should put him… as high as Pascal, though that sounds like a rash statement… I strongly recommend you go ahead" (Eliot, *Letters*, 332).
[4] Eliot, *Letters*, 350.

Faber passed on the risk involved in bringing a relatively unknown figure before the British public. It would be four more years before the first complete work of Kierkegaard got translated into English, and another six before Oxford University Press began its ambitious project to bring most of his works into English.

Fourteen years later, Evelyn Waugh offered a window onto Kierkegaard's changed fortunes. *The Loved One*, Waugh's 1946 satire of British expatriates in Hollywood, mentions early on a list of intellectual fads sweeping over the educated sectors of the British public. Heading a list that includes figures like Kafka and Sartre? One Søren Kierkegaard, a figure familiar to Waugh through his brother-in-law Alexander Dru, translator of some of Kierkegaard's key texts, but also a name on the lips of enough Britons to make the sharply observant Waugh take notice. "Kierkegaard, Kafka, Connolly, Compton-Burnett, Sartre… Who are they? What do they want?" inquires one character, to which his conversation partner, more recently arrived from Britain, replies, "I've heard of some of them. They were being talked about in London at the time I left."[5] The sense of Kierkegaard as a figure in the air, recognized by name if not understood in substance, permeated England during the 1940s, such that Rachel Wetzsteon has suggested that admitting an admiration for Kierkegaard during this period was akin to confessing that you drank several cups of coffee a day, or enjoyed going to the movies.[6]

The story of how, in the span of a decade and a half, Kierkegaard went from publishing liability to popular sensation forms the background to this study. In one sense this history matters, as it uncovers a fact not often discussed in intellectual or literary histories of Britain: the moment, coincidental with World War II, in which Kierkegaard fever swept across the British

[5] Evelyn Waugh, *Four Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003), 403.
[6] Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 83.

intelligentsia.[7] On the other hand, such a foregrounding of this Kierkegaardian moment risks sidelining Kierkegaard's reception in Britain as a brief spot of time, just another forties fad, like zoot suits or the Jitterbug. The truth is more complex: while Kierkegaard never became as common a figure in British intellectual life as other continental imports like Freud or Nietzsche, his impact lasted long after his initial introduction to Great Britain. While never, in W.H. Auden's words concerning Freud, "A whole climate of opinion,"[8] Kierkegaard's impact on British thought and literature lingered in subterranean ways. His impact may be compared to that of an earthquake, with early tremors foretelling an epicenter of impact in the war period, but with aftershocks lasting for decades after. This dissertation, then, though it begins in the crisis time of war, traces Kierkegaard's lingering influence well after Hitler's defeat.

Beginning in 1932 – not only the year of Eliot's decision, but the year that Aldous Huxley, one of the subjects of Chapter One, began reading *Either/Or* in French and German – this dissertation charts traces of Kierkegaard as he appears over the course of what I will term the long midcentury. This period, very roughly stretching from the late interwar period through the ascent of Margaret Thatcher, proved one of marked transition and change in British public life,

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[7] There are only two major attempts to wrestle with Kierkegaard's impact in Britain. One, George Pattison's essay "From Prophet of Now to Postmodern Ironist," acknowledges the popular impact of Kierkegaard but focuses primarily on his reception in the worlds of academic philosophy and theology. The other, a dissertation by Peter A. Schilling, looks at Kierkegaard in both America and Britain, but focuses on a narrow period (right around the war), and, though a work of literary criticism, discusses in depth only two figures: Auden and Eliot. See George Pattison, "From Prophet of Now to Postmodern Ironist," in *Søren Kierkegaard's International Reception Tome I*, ed. Jon Stewart (London: Routledge, 2009); and Peter Schilling, *Søren Kierkegaard and Anglo-American Literary Culture of the Thirties and Forties* (Dissertation, Columbia University, 1994). An even more diffuse attempt to wrestle with Kierkegaard's legacy in Anglo-American literature can be found in Hugh S. Pyper, "Kierkegaard and English Language Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 570-89. Pyper's essay is clearly designed as a brief summary of some major figures who interacted with Kierkegaard, including several (W.H. Auden and R.S. Thomas) who I examine in this dissertation. Each author's interaction with Kierkegaard is given no more than two pages, and Pyper's remarks are summative rather than critical.

[8] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 275.

both literarily and socially. Throughout this work I connect the aesthetic and social, showing how Kierkegaard left his marks not only on the level of ideas, but on the level of style.

As I shall explore later in this introduction, Kierkegaard was from the first associated with a sense of crisis in British life, and I have traced in my chapters a series of crises into which his works spoke. Though the particular crisis into which Kierkegaard spoke changes from chapter to chapter, a common thread connects the uses to which the various authors put Kierkegaard: his idea that literature presents an opportunity to nurture change in individual readers even in times of crisis. Kierkegaard, who owed a huge intellectual debt to Socrates, developed the Socratic idea of "maieutic" communication, a form of communication where the author acts as midwife for the reader – present at and assisting in the "birth" of truth in the reader, but only indirectly responsible for this birth, the main impetus for which must come from the reader. Like his hero Socrates, Kierkegaard viewed himself as just such a midwife.[9] More importantly, he believed that God himself utilized maieutic communication, and that no truth of religious importance could be communicated directly.[10] Though Kierkegaard scholars more commonly refer to Kierkegaard's broader idea of "indirect communication" – a formulation he himself used quite often – I have adopted the more evocative "maieutic literature" throughout

[9] "[My original idea was] that Christianity required a 'maieuticer' and that I understood how to be one… The idea of proclaiming Christianity, of confessing Christ, does not fit in with Christendom – that is exactly where the maieutic attitude fits in, which begins by assuming that men are in possession of the greatest good and only tries to make them aware of what they have" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 199).

[10] In a fascinating passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard compares the work of God in nature to the act of the elusive author, strongly suggesting that Kierkegaard viewed his own indirect authorship as modeled on divine precedent: "For no anonymous author can more cunningly conceal himself, no practitioner of the maieutic art can more carefully withdraw himself from the direct relationship, than God. He is in the creation, and present everywhere in it, but directly He is not there; and only when the individual turns to his inner self, and hence only in the inwardness of self-activity, does he have his attention aroused, and is enabled to see God… Nature is, indeed, the work of God, but only the handiwork is directly present, not God. Is not this to behave, in His relationship to the individual, like an elusive author who nowhere sets down his result in large type, or gives it to the reader beforehand in a preface? And why is God elusive? Precisely because He is the truth, and by being elusive desires to keep men from error" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941], 218).

this dissertation, since it is a type of indirect communication which focuses attention on the relationship between author and reader.[11] I will also use a series of terms which cluster around the idea of the maieutic, speaking variously of literature that nurtures, develops, or provokes the reader.

I find the concept of maieutic literature invaluable for this study, not simply for historical reasons of faithfulness to Kierkegaard's presentation of his own work, but also because indirect communication restores a sense of risk to the writing of literature, a risk that Kierkegaard, along with the authors in this study, valued. Kierkegaard balanced a firm sense of the core concepts which shaped his writing with an acknowledgement that others might miss the point in their reading of his works. Such a combination suggests that Kierkegaard scholars might err in two ways, either by engaging in what Roger Poole describes as "blunt reading," in which the *how* of Kierkegaard's rhetoric gets pushed aside in the hunt for the *what*,[12] or by stressing the irony and indirectness so much that the content disappears – a common error for Poole himself and others who seek, in the name of deconstruction, to claim Kierkegaard as one who "Has made all solutions impossible."[13] By focusing on the maieutic, I hope to preserve some sense of the

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[11] Maieutic communication would appear, in Kierkegaard's mind, to be a subspecies of indirect communication. After he had completed the pseudonymous phase of his career, he wrote in his journals about the limits of being a maieuticer, and the need for the midwife to finally transform into the witness, a state of being connected to Christian revelation. However, even this status as "witness" contains indirectness. See Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 259-60.

[12] "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58-66.

[13] Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1993), 1. See also 1-27, 200-261 for a fuller explication of Poole's post-structuralist indebted reading of Kierkegaard's indirect communication. For other poststructuralist readings, see Sylvia Agacinski, *Aparté: Deaths and Conceptions of Søren Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida University Press, 1988); Pat Bigelow, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee: Florida University Press, 1987); *Kierkegaard and Literature: Irony, Repetition, and Criticism*, ed. Ronald Schleifer and Robert Markley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984); and *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matuštík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). In this last volume, see especially John D. Caputo, "Instants, Secrets, and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida," 216-38. For a critical view of deconstructive takes on Kierkegaard, see Sylvia Walsh, "Kierkegaard and Postmodernism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29.2 (April 1991): 113-122. For a more positive assessment, see Steven Shakespeare, "Kierkegaard and Postmodernism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 464-83.

ethical and religious charge behind the writing of Kierkegaard and his British heirs, while still acknowledging the ways in which their style helped disguise intent.

Furthermore, the author-reader relationship plays a key role in my dissertation for two reasons. First, midcentury British writers who engaged with Kierkegaard tended to do so in an intensely personal way.[14] Indeed, the title of this dissertation, "From the Papers of One Still Living," the name of an early Kierkegaard review of a Hans Christian Andersen novel, has been chosen primarily because it expresses the sense shared by many of these authors that Kierkegaard's presence hovered around them in a very real and active way.[15] This feeling of close, personal connection to Kierkegaard also motivates my decision to quote from the first English translations of his works: though the later Princeton translations spearheaded by Edna and Howard Hong more accurately capture Kierkegaard's words, the affective charge of the original translations (most by Walter Lowrie, David F. Swenson, and Alexander Dru) give insight into Kierkegaard's ability to inspire feelings of kinship through his words. Second, the ability of literature to reach and influence individual readers forms a core concern of each of the

[14] Assessing Kierkegaard's legacy in Anglophone literature, Hugh S. Pyper argues that "One of Kierkegaard's most significant literary legacies may be the identification of a particular character type: the reader of Kierkegaard… There is an implication that Kierkegaard's writings are not for everyone and act as their own gatekeepers. There is a secret invitation that each reader may take as directed to him or herself and which can seduce the reader into a closer engagement with the text, which is coupled to a self-questioning dialogue with it" ("Kierkegaard and English Language Literature," 571).

[15] What would become one of the most important interpretations of Kierkegaard in the twentieth century, Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," began life as a speech at a colloquium, hosted by UNESCO, titled "The Living Kierkegaard." Sartre begins his essay by struggling with the implications of this title, suggesting that "If we cannot revive this martyr of interiority other than in the form of an object of knowledge, a determination of his praxis will forever escape us: his living effort to elude knowledge through reflective life, his claim to be, in his very singularity and at the heart of his finitude, the absolute subject, defined in interiority by his absolute relationship with being… We shall ask ourselves whether the presence, that is the subjectivity of someone else, always inaccessible to cognition in its strict sense, can nevertheless be given to us by some other means…. Either Kierkegaard today… is dissolved by the enzymes of knowledge or he persists in demonstrating to us the still virulent scandal of what one might call the transhistoricity of historical man" (*Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews [New York: Pantheon, 1974], 141-2). Likewise, W.H. Auden's anthology of Kierkegaard quotes bears the title *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*.

authors studied, and every chapter takes as its aesthetic focus a different means by which these authors sought to engage readers in such a way as to develop them as individuals.

Grasping the nurturing possibilities of literature does not only elucidate the importance of Kierkgaard's work to these particular authors; such an understanding opens up a new reading of midcentury British literature, a contested period usually divided between late modernism, realism, and postmodernism.[16] The authors studied here, however – along with other major midcentury authors, including Iris Murdoch and William Golding – fit into this tripartite schema only uneasily.[17] Recognizing the midcentury presence of maieutic literature, then, helps reclaim a place for those midcentury authors who avoided equally the radical ideology and aesthetics of postmodernism and what David Lodge identifies as realism's "aesthetics… [and] ideology of compromise."[18]

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[16] Late modernism, a term coined by Tyrus Miller, denotes the writing of modernists in the late 1920s and 1930s that felt some sense of its own impending decline. Miller argues that, as they examined modernism's decline, late modernists such as Wyndham Lewis and Djuna Barnes paved the way for postmodernism (*Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Wars* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 7). The essays in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) seek to carve out a space for authors of the 1930s such as Storm Jameson and T.H. White who do not fit the late modernist mold, but also do not predict postmodernism. For a standard evaluation of post-war fiction that dichotomizes between realism and postmodernism, see Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995). For a more recent and more nuanced approach to post-war fiction, see the collection *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Midcentury*, ed. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[17] Murdoch is sometimes grouped with the Angry Young Men of 1950s realist fiction due to her creation of alienated protagonists, but this label has been contested even by other members of that loose consortium. Colin Wilson, for example, refers to Murdoch as a "frustrated romantic" (Introduction to Dale Salwak, *Interviews with Britain's Angry Young Men* [San Bernardino: The Borgos Press, 1984], 10). See also Humphrey Carpenter, *The Angry Young Men: A Literary Comedy of the 1950s* (London: Penguin, 2002), 80-1.

[18] David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads," in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 108.

## Critical Contexts

> *I can only be understood after my death: I can, while I live, believe and be blessedly assured that I will be understood, I myself can understand why I cannot be understood before, and that such is my task, an act of self-denial: but it is indeed a tremendous work* – 1848 entry in Kierkegaard's Journal[19]

Three major scholarly contexts weave their way through my story, fields for which the rediscovery of the British Kierkegaard provides a helpful nuance to contemporary debates and trends. Two are literary, one philosophical; two are broad, one more specific; together they form the critical edifice on which this dissertation builds. The first important context is that of British literature of the midcentury. In particular I am interested in the relatively recent spate of books which focus on the response of British authors, starting in the 1930s, to the rapid shifts in British social and imperial structure that occurred in the wake of World War I. The standard study here, Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island*, traces in late modernist works a growing dissatisfaction with the notion of "Britishness" – with its implications of imperial sprawl – and the attempts of some authors to focus instead on "Englishness," a recalibration in favor of domestic affairs and local places.[20] In the wake of *A Shrinking Island* scholars have grappled with other ways in which shifting British social contexts influenced literary production, from the city/country divide and the boom in rural tourism, to the epoch-shaking events of World War II.[21]

Recapturing Kierkegaard in the British context brings into focus another element of British society rapidly changing during these same years: British religion, specifically Christianity's

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[19] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 233.
[20] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). For an interesting forerunner to Esty's book, see David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
[21] See Peter Lowe, *English Journeys* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012). On World War II, see especially Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

decline as a dominant force in British life. Religion has been curiously absent from most accounts of twentieth-century British literature, and though recent scholarly attempts have been made to recapture religious traces in modernism, little has been done to extend this consideration to the midcentury moment – a particular shame given that the midcentury featured robust public debates about the role of religion in society, and important transformations in the practice of Christianity in Britain.[22] Throughout the dissertation, but especially in Chapter Two, I examine how Kierkegaard offered to religious authors a new way of speaking about Christianity, one that shied away from the assumed Christianity of "Christendom" and embraced Christianity as an activity marginal to British society as a whole. Religious authors like Muriel Spark could then wrestle over religious subject matter without assuming a shared base of knowledge or belief with their readers. Rather than mourn the loss of Christianity's social prestige, these authors, following Kierkegaard, embraced the sidelining of religion as an avenue for making Christianity fresh, stripped of the detritus of Christendom. As Douglas V. Steere, an early translator of Kierkegaard, put it, Kierkegaard has the power to "Force us back upon the logic of commitment, and make us return to that nodal point which a thin social religion so often blunts: the point of an individual's irrevocable responsibility before God."[23] I read these authors as attuned to the opportunities provided by literature to highlight the "individual's irrevocable responsibility before God." In a way, these authors performed a redefinition of their horizons similar to that of the move from Britishness to Englishness identified by Esty: they traded the vastness of

[22] For considerations of modernism and religion, see Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); and Anthony Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). For a recent start in examining midcentury religion and literature, see Allen Hepburn, *A Grain of Faith: Religion in Midcentury British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Hepburn does an excellent job situating midcentury religion in the changing social contexts of post-war Britain. For example, he notes the role played by atomic weapons in prolonging the sense of anxiety after the war, and the role of churches in decrying the nuclear threat (21-28).

[23] Douglas V. Steere, "Kierkegaard in English," *The Journal of Religion* 24.4 (Oct 1944): 278.

Christendom for the smaller arena of Christian practice in a society dominated by religious indifference.

This embrace of a more socially marginal Christianity points toward the second critical context for this dissertation, the emergent sub-field of post-secular studies. Rising largely out of the work of Talal Asad and Charles Taylor in challenging traditional narratives of secularization, post-secular studies in its literary form looks for traces of religious belief in supposedly secular works of literature.[24] Until now, the locus of post-secular literary studies has resided in contemporary American literature, thanks to early works by John McClure and Amy Hungerford which outlined the strong affinities of works of contemporary American authors like Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison for a fragmented spiritual practice, one that defies both secularity and traditional religion.[25] In the accounts of McClure and Hungerford, religious belief survives the supposed secularization of American life and literature, but pokes out only in fragmented forms, what McClure identifies as "Religiously inflected disruption" of secular norms, and the "rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects".[26] Other scholars of post-secular literature have noted the desire of post-secular scholarship to "Resist any master narrative" – secular or religious – and have argued that in post-secular literature "The religious is not reaffirmed so much as it is engaged."[27] Of late, however, several scholars, most notably Tracy Fessenden, have challenged the aims of post-secular studies precisely on the grounds that the field cannot adequately account for traditional religion, or any

[24] See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[25] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); John McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).
[26] McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 3.
[27] Michael Kauffman, "Locating the Postsecular," *Religion & Literature* 41.3 (Autumn 2009): 68; Kathryn Ludwig, "Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Postsecular in Contemporary Fiction," *Religion & Literature* 41.3 (Autumn 2009): 83.

sort of belief that deviates from the generalized, politically progressive spirituality studied by McClure and Hungerford.[28]

One of the implicit arguments of this dissertation is that Kierkegaard provides a bridge between the post-secular emphasis on fragmented religion and the practice of more unified traditional religion. Not only do I move the post-secular into Britain, I show that traditional religious belief itself may be subject to the uncertainties and fragmentations of post-secularism.[29] This is a point recognized by Charles Taylor in his conception of the "fragilization" of belief; that is to say, even devout religious believers, in the context of modern society, experience their beliefs as something chosen, not given, and thus subject to possible further change.[30] Kierkegaard, however, had already made this observation a century before.[31] His descriptions of the life of faith portray such faith not as a source of complacent obedience to dogma, but as a wellspring of anxious activity. He does so most evocatively in a phrase that reappears throughout his work, and which will crop up often in this dissertation: his description of the person of faith as living out over seventy thousand fathoms of water. Attempting a definition of faith in

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[28] Fessenden criticizes post-secular scholars for their definition of religion in what she calls a "bookstore vernacular," that is "A vivid, if arbitrary, sampling of traditions, periods, and practices conceptually shelved between "Magic and the Occult," at one end and "Personal Growth" at the other" ("The Problem of the Postsecular" *American Literary History* 26.1 (Sept 2014): 160. Elsewhere, Laura Levitt identifies the problems Judaism – alongside other religions where communal ritual practice gets entangled with identity and politics – poses for the postsecular ("Rereading the Postsecular from an American Jewish Perspective," *Religion & Literature* 41.3 (Autumn 2009): 107-118).

[29] Allan Hepburn's account of British literature and religion flirts with postsecular explanations in the vein of Hungerford and McClure: "Instead of deliberating on whether God existed or not, British writers understood faith as a human necessity in the face of conflict and rebuilding. In its expanded sense, faith involved nationalism, cultural heritage, and commitment to social betterment… Many midcentury figures conceived of faith as ecumenical and international, with local or nation instantiations. At mid-century, novels, poems, and radio broadcasts do not express Christian doctrine so much as test the possibilities of faith in an age of unbelief" (*A Grain of Faith*, 1). If Hepburn does lean a little too much on political and social explanations for interest in religion, he nevertheless allows for the possibility of sincere Christian practice among the authors he studies.

[30] See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299-321. Taylor describes the emotional impact of this fragilization as a sense that "We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and anxiety" (11).

[31] It's possible to trace the feeling back further still, through Pascal and St. Augustine, to St. Paul – mentioning only the most significant Christian instances. Kierkegaard, however, presents the problem for the first time in a distinctly modern context.

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard says: "Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty… If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."[32] By seeing the life of faith – even the faith of a Christian who adheres to traditional doctrinal positions – as living constantly out over seventy thousand fathoms, Kierkegaard suggests that believers always experience faith as fragmented and difficult, a struggle for survival. That the authors studied in this dissertation – all of whom except Aldous Huxley practiced some form of (relatively) traditional Christianity – experienced this fragmentation in their own writing about faith, a fragmentation perhaps heightened by the knowledge of Christianity's lessening hold on British society, opens a new window on post-secular literature, a scholarly approach that allows the post-secular to encompass forms of belief that are at once coherent in concept and still fragmented in practice.

The final context considered throughout this dissertation moves us from a consideration of the texts and authors it discusses to an examination of Kierkegaard himself and his reception in the twentieth century. Anchored as this dissertation is in literary studies, I hope to offer an alternative perspective on the field of Kierkegaard studies that recaptures the distinctly literary aspects of his work. Scholars writing on the aesthetic dimensions of Kierkegaard's writing have often observed that these aesthetic dimensions have been shunted aside in favor of theological or philosophical treatments of his work. Though scattered academic treatments of Kierkegaard's aesthetics have been written in English over the past half-century, most notably by Louis Mackey, George Pattison, and Sylvia Walsh, it is only in the last decade that interest in

[32] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 182.

Kierkegaard's status as literary artist has begun to pick up scholarly momentum.[33] Much of this interest comes thanks to the writing of Eric Ziolkowski, whose work tracing literary influences on Kierkegaard in *The Literary Kierkegaard* has served to flesh out the literary figures floating in the background of Kierkegaard's words.[34] The recent essay collection *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, edited by Ziolkowski, presents the most comprehensive account of Kierkegaard's interaction with various aesthetic forms and his subsequent influence on artists.[35]

As valuable as this recent work has been, it rests on a historically dubious narrative of recovery: the aesthetic Kierkegaard had long been lost but has now been found.[36] Louis Mackey asserts that, even as they acknowledge the unavoidably aesthetic nature of Kierkegaard's writings, most scholars go on to treat him "As if he were a straightforward philosophical or theological writer".[37] The assumption of a non-existent aesthetic reception of Kierkegaard has been especially strong with regard to English language interaction with his work. George Pattison's overview of British reception focuses primarily on philosophers and theologians, giving the impression that these were the British figures most invested in Kierkegaard's ideas.[38] Roger Poole goes farther, asserting that because the original English translators of Kierkegaard were clergymen and theologians, "There was from the first a remarkably impoverished

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[33] Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), esp. 223-242. See also the essay collection *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, ed. George Pattison (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

[34] Eric Ziolkowski, *The Literary Kierkegaard* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

[35] *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018). The book includes essays on Kierkegaard's thoughts on dance and the visual arts, as well as reflections on his significance for cinema, the music of Bob Dylan, and other contemporary aesthetic forms.

[36] See Eric Ziolkowski, "Introduction," in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 3.

[37] Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, x.

[38] Pattison, "From 'Prophet of Now' to Postmodern Ironist." Pattison does acknowledge reception of Kierkegaard at the cultural level, especially in the initial burst of enthusiasm for Kierkegaard, but he focuses much more on the philosophical genealogy of Kierkegaard in England.

awareness of Kierkegaard as a writer, as a stylist, and as a rhetorician" in Britain and the United States.[39] These accounts of the non-existent aesthetic Kierkegaard rely on an incomplete understanding of his importance in midcentury Britain. By focusing on the writers, as opposed to philosophers and theologians, who studied Kierkegaard's writings in this period, I aim to show that, far from being an afterthought, Kierkegaard's aesthetics loomed large in the British assessment of his legacy. Furthermore, by detailing the close connection between how these authors valued Kierkegaard's ethical and religious claims and how they imitated his aesthetic methods, I show that the aesthetic and religious elements of Kierkegaard's authorship cannot easily be prized apart. Rather than treating Kierkegaard the religious thinker separately from Kierkegaard the literary experimenter, his British literary heirs intuited the ties between his style and his message and applied his lessons to their own works.

## Prehistories: From a Market Town to the Marketplace of Ideas

> *In relation to the present age my talents are like a lovely little place which is too far to go on foot and too near for a day's expedition and is therefore neither visited nor known; and so I do not rise upon the horizon of every day, nor upon the telescopic horizon of the century* – 1839 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[40]

"It is a miserable existence… to be a genius in a provincial town."[41] So Kierkegaard summed up his life as a member of Copenhagen society. Though he saw some advantage in his geographical marginalization, it also caused him no end of consternation to be trapped in a nation dominated, in his view, by dull, officious bureaucrats and merchants (his other favorite epithet for Copenhagen was to deride it as a "market town").[42] The son of a wealthy merchant,

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[39] Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard," 59.
[40] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 77.
[41] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 282.
[42] In his journals Kierkegaard notes that observing life in a country like Denmark which, while small and lagging behind Germany, was not fully disconnected from Continental trends, allowed him to fully grasp the Danish

Kierkegaard utilized his inheritance not only to live the life of a dandy, but to finance the publication of his books, which were treated with indifference by the Danish public.[43] The failure of the Danish public to receive Kierkegaard's works is not too surprising given that he consistently attacked his fellow citizens for what he saw as their bourgeois mediocrity. Styling himself after Socrates, Kierkegaard sought, both in pseudonymous works like *Either/Or*, veronymous essays like *Two Ages*, and his numerous religious discourses, to rouse his fellow Danes from their sluggish acceptance of received wisdom. His rhetoric turned especially withering when aimed against what he called "Christendom," the official form of Christianity sanctioned by both the state and middle-class practice. Kierkegaard's attacks on the reading public and on official Christianity constituted a major source of his appeal for his midcentury British readers, faced as they were with both the challenges of mass media and the lingering specter, however weakened, of political and social Christianity. By attacking his contemporaries, Kierkegaard simultaneously ensured that his immediate public would reject him, but that future generations would find his bromides valuable resources in their own struggles – a future Kierkegaard predicted for himself repeatedly.[44]

Despite his own confidence that he would be remembered posthumously, for the first half-century after his death Kierkegaard remained sealed in the tomb of Scandinavian

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situation. As he argues, "The whole of Europe is working towards its own demoralization – but in Copenhagen conditions are so restricted that my observations and calculations are able to get complete control over them… I am like a doctor who disposes of a complete preparation but it is not so large that it cannot be viewed as a whole" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 214).

[43] See Joachim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3-4, 102-3, 517-9, 531-4 and 802-3.

[44] Assessing *Fear and Trembling* in an 1849 journal entry, Kierkegaard asserts that "Oh, once I am dead – *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough to immortalise my name. It will be read, and translated into foreign languages. People will shudder at the terrible pathos which the book contains. But when it was written, when the man who was looked upon as the author went about incognito, as a flâneur and appeared to be lively and frivolous, wit itself: nobody could grasp its true seriousness" (331-2).

obscurity.[45] Even in his own country, he remained largely a marginal figure, ignored by major authors like Hans Christian Andersen and misinterpreted by his opponents in the Danish state church. For the first twenty five or so years after his death in 1855, Kierkegaard's work underwent what Habib C. Malik refers to as a "prolonged period of hibernation," with occasional lone figures "nibbling" at his works, but usually devoting themselves to a single theme, at the expense of Kierkegaard's overarching concerns.[46] The two most important of these nibblers, however, would have a long-term effect on Kierkegaard's international reception. Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright often considered the most consequential Scandinavian author of the nineteenth century, wrote several plays that dabbled in Kierkegaardian thought, most notably *Brand*, about a Pietist minister convinced of his calling from God. Ibsen's play explores the Kierkegaardian concept of religious authority, a theme that would prove important in British receptions of Kierkegaard's work.[47] Though Ibsen's seal of approval did not immediately launch Kierkegaard into prominence, the playwright's soaring reputation by century's end helped raise Kierkegaard's own reputation as well.[48] Equally significant was the praise of the Danish critic Georg Brandes, who gained a following in the German-speaking world, and who praised

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[45] For my account of Kierkegaard's reception history prior to his translation into English, I am indebted to Habib C. Malik's excellent, thorough *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997). Unless otherwise noted, all historical details in this section come via Malik.

[46] Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, 136.

[47] As we shall see in Chapter Three, W.H. Auden used Ibsen as a sounding board for working through Kierkegaardian ideas of vocation in several of his essays.

[48] James Joyce learned Norwegian at the beginning of his career specifically to read Ibsen in his original language. This knowledge of a Scandinavian language with a strong resemblance to Danish perhaps made Joyce aware of Kierkegaard before the general English reading public. Joyce's final novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, contains several punning references to Kierkegaard. Malik agrees with the general thrust of Joyce scholarship that these occurrences do not suggest an acquaintance on Joyce's part with Kierkegaard's actual works (*Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, 345-6). Bartholomew Ryan, however, argues that the sheer amount of reference to Kierkegaardian concepts in *Finnegan's Wake* suggests at least some baseline familiarity with Kierkegaard's work, even if it came filtered primarily through Ibsen. See Bartholomew Ryan, "James Joyce: Negation, Kirkeyaard, Wake, and Repetition," in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Literature, Criticism and Art Tome IV: The Anglophone World*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 109-132.

Kierkegaard as "An enormous genius, one who comes once every hundred years."[49] Brandes, despite his praise, may actually have done Kierkegaard more harm than good, as he initiated a strain of biological-psychological criticism, privileging a morbid interest in Kierkegaard's personal life over elucidation of his works, which has continued down to the present.

In part thanks to Brandes, Kierkegaard's major international breakthrough happened at the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany. The man largely responsible for this breakthrough, Christoph Schrempf, started as a theology student, but became disillusioned with Christianity. His interest in Kierkegaard survived his loss of faith, though he swung back and forth between admiration for and resentment of Kierkegaard throughout his life. Schrempf led the way in translating Kierkegaard into German, eventually overseeing a twelve-volume edition of his works. But his method was distinctly idiosyncratic, as he often deliberately edited, abridged, or mistranslated Kierkegaard's works according to his own impulses. Later scholars resented Schrempf's freewheeling approach to translation, but his edition had an enormous impact in Germany nonetheless, such that the Kierkegaard who had cemented his place in Weimar Germany bore the marks of Schrempf's proto-existentialist approach to Kierkegaard, one that downplayed the religious aspects of Kierkegaard's writings.

German appreciation for Kierkegaard accelerated rapidly during the early years of the twentieth century. Students of his work included major intellectual figures like Rudolf Kassner and Georg Lukács, and writers like Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka. Most significant for Kierkegaard's later reception into English, however, was the German Catholic Theodor Haecker, who worked to counteract Schrempf's influence by revealing a very different Kierkegaard to the world. Presenting a "many-sided" Kierkegaard, one at once a poet, a prophet, and a satirist,

[49] Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, 230.

Haecker not only interpreted Kierkegaard but imitated him, producing critical works with "an audible ring of existential urgency."[50] The urgency present in Haecker's critical work on Kierkegaard extended to his translations as well, the first of which, a translation of the fiercely polemical essay "The Present Age," appeared with impeccable timing on July 1, 1914, on the eve of World War I. An eventual Catholic convert, Haecker gave the world a fully religious Kierkegaard, a picture of the philosopher that would find sympathy with the two men most responsible for bringing Kierkegaard to Britain: Walter Lowrie, a retired American Episcopal priest, and Alexander Dru, like Haecker a convert to Roman Catholicism. Haecker became important in the British reception of Kierkegaard not only indirectly through his mentoring of Dru, but directly, thanks to the publication of Dru's translation of several critical essays on Kierkegaard written by Haecker. Because Haecker, not Schrempf, served as the main channel through which Kierkegaard came to Britain, the Kierkegaard encountered by British writers was at once deeply religious and aesthetically adventurous. In addition, Haecker's use of Kierkegaard to critique the rising power of the Nazi party lent an urgency to Kierkegaard's thoughts on crisis, an urgency that would carry over to Kierkegaard's initial British audience.

Though a few attempts had been made to translate Kierkegaard into English before the mid-thirties, 1935 marks the true beginning of Kierkegaard studies in English.[51] That year saw the release of E.L. Allen's *Kierkegaard: His Life and Thought*, the first major anglophone critical study of Kierkegaard, with David F. Swenson's translation of *Philosophical Fragments*,

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[50] Ibid, 374.

[51] Much of the information in this section comes from the following: Steere, "Kierkegaard in English"; Michael J. Paulus, Jr., "From a Publisher's Point of View: Charles Williams' Role in Publishing Kierkegaard in English," in *Charles Williams and His Contemporaries*, ed. S. Bray and Richard Sturch (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009): 20-41; John Heywood-Thomas and Hinrich Siefken, "Theodor Haecker and Alexander Dru: A Contribution to the Discovery of Kierkegaard in Britain," *Kierkegaardiana* 18 (1996): 173-90; and Cicero Bruce, "The Influence of Charles Williams on the Life and Work of W.H. Auden," *VII* 16 (1999): 15-30.

the first translation of a complete work by Kierkegaard into English, following close on its heels in 1936. Swenson, an American of Scandinavian descent who had discovered Kierkegaard in Danish thanks to a proliferation of Kierkegaard's works in libraries in the upper Midwest, might have played a more significant role in the translation of Kierkegaard into English had he not died in 1940, leaving several translations unfinished.[52] The gap left by Swenson was filled largely by the combined efforts of Lowrie and Dru. Of the two, Lowrie was by far the more prolific, translating twelve volumes of Kierkegaard's works, as well as penning a long biography that contains extensive quotations from Kierkegaard's writings. Lowrie brought to his work on Kierkegaard the religious interests of a retired minister, but also the personal zeal of a true disciple, and the prefaces and introductions of his translations repeatedly emphasize the importance of Kierkegaard for the individual reader – an emphasis that British readers picked up on. Dru, though he translated far less, was almost as important as Lowrie in bringing Kierkegaard before the English-speaking public: he produced a massive (though still heavily abridged) translation of Kierkegaard's *Journals*, the work that above all others resonated with English readers. The urgency and intimacy of the *Journals* shines through in Dru's translation, which pulses with a Kierkegaardian sense of crisis. He also translated Haecker, provided biographical and theoretical introductions to Kierkegaard, and generally acted as a networker connecting those interested in the philosopher's work.

In that pivotal year 1935, Lowrie and Dru independently converged upon the third person who would prove essential in bringing Kierkegaard into English: the novelist and poet Charles Williams, perhaps best known for his association with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, but

[52] Walter Lowrie called Swenson "The Nestor of Kierkegaardian studies in America" (*Kierkegaard* [London: Oxford University Press, 1938], Dedication Page).

primarily important here in his role as an editor at Oxford University Press. Each unaware of the other, Lowrie and Dru wrote to Williams proposing a multi-volume release of Kierkegaard's works in English. Though, like Eliot, initially hesitant – he worried over committing to a project with no actual translations to examine – Williams quickly got on board, and proved a strong advocate for the series up until his death in 1945.[53] He also helped navigate the strong personalities involved in the work, especially Lowrie, who had to be placated at various times due to creative and economic differences with Oxford's decisions. Though Lowrie did eventually break off publishing with Oxford, choosing to publish the rest of his translations through Princeton University Press, Oxford continued to release the books in Britain. Beyond Williams' influence in bringing the translations to press, he plays a significant role in the story of Kierkegaard for another reason: it was he who introduced W.H. Auden – at the time tentatively making his way back into the Church of England under Williams' influence – to the works of Kierkegaard. Williams' book of church history, *The Descent of the Dove*, prominently features Kierkegaard near its end, where he called Kierkegaard the 19th Century's closest equivalent to Calvin, Dominic, and Augustine.[54] Williams' Kierkegaard was both religious and paradoxical, a figure who "Coordinated experiences in a new manner… [who] caused alien and opposite experiences to coinhere".[55] Auden would go on to become the most consistent and vocal British advocate of Kierkegaard's writings, and the version of Kierkegaard Auden engages with follows in Williams' mold. Of course, by the time *The Descent of the Dove* piqued Auden's interest in

[53] Responding to Dru in 1935, Williams noted that "Kierkegaard is no doubt frightfully important but we would not promise to publish a manuscript by St. Thomas or Socrates without seeing it." In early 1936, however, Williams seemed more optimistic, noting that "I think myself that sooner or later Kierkegaard will have a pretty good vogue for some time" (Quoted in Paulus, Jr., "From a Publisher's Point of View," 24).
[54] Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 212.
[55] Ibid.

the philosopher, the world had conspired to thrust Kierkegaard into the zeitgeist as *the* prime explicator of impending international crisis.

## A Fundamental Metaphysic of Life: Kierkegaard and Crisis

> *Geniuses are like a storm, they come up against the wind; terrify men; clean the atmosphere* – 1849 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[56]

That the Kierkegaard who emerged in the British consciousness was tied inextricably to a sense of crisis can be seen by examining one of the first British books to engage with his thought – a book largely forgotten today, but popular on its release, and representative of the general tone in which British writers discussed Kierkegaard at the time. Written under the pseudonym Nicodemus, *Midnight Hour* comprises the personal diary of a man in crisis during six months of the year 1941. One of the low years of the British war effort, 1941 presented ample opportunities for dire proclamations – the term "Midnight Hour" is not misapplied. Yet Nicodemus' own midnight hour does not only concern the hardships of life during World War II; his diary repeatedly connects the fight against Hitler to a more personal crisis, the battle within his own self. He sees these two struggles as intimately intertwined: "In fact the terrible and terrific drama of the war is, point by point, an apocalypse of this war in my soul and I am obsessed with the thought that this inner will in the end decide that outer war… that we fight in our own hearts, not merely for our own salvation, but for that of the world."[57] To Nicodemus, Nazism is but one symptom – though to be sure the most terrible – of a deeper crisis that has its roots in the abandonment of true religion. Christianity, especially the Church of England to which Nicodemus belongs, has compromised itself, embracing the way of the flesh rather than the way

[56] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 324.
[57] Nicodemus, *Midnight Hour* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 16.

of spirit. Only a regeneration of spirit – the kind promised by Jesus to Nicodemus' New Testament namesake – can revive Christianity among individuals, the nation, and the world.

Written with the immediacy one might expect from a diary composed during a six month long dark night of the soul, *Midnight Hour* proved popular, even as the tide of war turned: in a 1943 letter to POW Montgomery Belgion C.S. Lewis called it "The outstanding [Christian] book of the moment."[58] As personal as it remains, however, *Midnight Hour* also engages philosophical and theological matters, and when it does so it channels these energies largely through the person of Kierkegaard. Beginning on the title page, which bears as one of its epigraphs a Kierkegaard quote that gives resonance to the book's title,[59] Kierkegaard's presence ripples through the book as Nicodemus engages in the struggle of becoming a self. Nicodemus confesses that he has found the height of religious ecstasy in the writings of the Danish philosopher and his contemporary German disciple Karl Barth, painting a picture of the sublime worthy of Turner.[60] "To read him is like rock-climbing," Nicodemus proclaims, after having devoured Kierkegaard's essay *The Present Age* in one sitting, "One ascends the craggy paradox of his thought painfully, inch by inch… till, suddenly, some rugged self-evident truth breaks on the view, in a high, thin pure air and a bare world of elemental thought."[61] Though he recognizes the difficulty in sustaining such heights, Nicodemus finds tamer versions of belief ruined for him, and braces himself to remain

[58] Quoted in Bruce R. Johnson, "Lewis's Aid to British Prisoners of War," *Sensucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal* Vol. 12 (2018): 58. Belgion must have been proud: he was an early booster of Kierkegaard, reviewing several of the first books to come out on him for the *Times Literary Supplement*.
[59] "There comes a midnight hour when all men must unmask" (Nicodemus, *Midnight Hour*). The other epigraph comes from the Book of John, and relates the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus at his own midnight hour.
[60] "I have known what I mean by this Christianity 'after the Spirit' at certain high moments of my life. I knew it in a blinding experience in the high mountains of Vaud, and I knew it flashing like lightning through the thunders of Barth and, even more intensely, in the thought of Kierkegaard" (Nicodemus, *Midnight Hour*, 60).
[61] Ibid, 111.

in Kierkegaard's rarified air, though few come with him.[62] If Nicodemus wishes to channel to his readers the electrical charge of a Christianity made spirit, then Kierkegaard serves as his lightning rod, drawing around his person all the energies of twice-born belief.

Nicodemus was, in fact, the pseudonym of Melville Chaning-Pearce, a sometime author and amateur theologian who would engage with the work of Kierkegaard throughout his career. Two years earlier, at the beginning of the war, Chaning-Pearce had published, under his own name, one of the first studies of Kierkegaard written in English, *The Terrible Crystal*, a collection of essays that meditates on the religious and existential ramifications of Kierkegaard on modern thought, including a consideration of Karl Barth. The Kierkegaard of *The Terrible Crystal* emerges like a bas relief of anxiety, etched from the negative space of crisis. In the prologue Chaning-Pearce describes his project as follows: "This book consists in studies in a certain type of modern Christian thought and feeling deriving from and attuned to conditions of terror and catastrophe… Here is a type of thought about religion for which crisis and catastrophe are the very stuff of religious reality. It is a thinking conceived in, interknit with and oriented toward catastrophe. Catastrophe is the magnetic north of its needle."[63] He goes on to assert the relevance of such a study for the modern consciousness, and to state his hope that the book will reach, not the theologian or traditional Christian, who will not have ears to hear his message, but "those for whom the conviction that both reality and religion alike are fundamentally catastrophic cannot be escaped… the great and growing multitude who are as sure that traditional

[62] "The Christian is best upon the heights. And that means peril and beating hearts and bleeding hands… And it means solitude or the companionship of a very few, and the incomprehension of those, the lovers and kin, who are left below. And silence – in an eternal silence. So fare the cragsmen of Christ" (Ibid, 112).
[63] Melville Chaning-Pearce, *The Terrible Crystal: Studies in Kierkegaard and Modern Christianity* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1940), xi-xii.

religion is not enough, as that, by a real and reborn religion alone, can the ruin of our world be averted."[64]

Though especially florid in their rhetoric, *Midnight Hour* and *The Terrible Crystal* are quite typical of works of their time in their treatment of Søren Kierkegaard. The initial Anglo-American reception of Kierkegaard cannot be disentangled from the deepening sense of world crisis building from the Great War and reaching its zenith at the start of World War II. That the two world wars occasioned a sense of crisis in Western countries is of course well-known, but recent scholarship has shown that this sense of crisis went beyond lingering aftershocks from the Great War and the creeping threat of fascism in Europe to create, in Britain especially, a wide-ranging feeling of impending catastrophe. Historian Richard Overy has detailed the pressures at play in interwar British society even before Hitler's shadow fell across Europe; the various anxieties of British society in this period combine to form what Overy has piquantly dubbed "the morbid age."[65] The British social fabric stretched under various pressures: economic catastrophe and the rise of socialism, technological efficiency and its backlash, and concern over the destruction of traditional, rural England.[66] Contra the popular narrative, this sense of unease did not dissipate in a grand swell of unity following the invasion of Poland. Indeed, as Marina MacKay has shown, leading literary figures of the war expressed a deep ambivalence – reflecting the wider ambivalence of the British public – toward a war that, while fought against an

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[64] Ibid, xiv.
[65] Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 1-7.
[66] On socialism, see James Klugmann, "The Crisis of the Thirties: A View from the Left," in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, ed. Jon Clark, et al (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 13-15. On technology and its complicated interaction with the British class system, see Evelyn Cobley, *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency: Ideology and Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 16. As Raymond Williams has convincingly argued, the "problem" of disappearing rural England has cropped up at various times throughout English history, and Williams cautions against a catastrophic approach to historiography, endorsing instead a gradualist approach (*The Country and the City* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973] 9-12, 35). Still, the feeling of catastrophic changes to the countryside was real enough in this period – see Lowe, *English Journeys*, 39, for a sense of how the English tourism industry capitalized on these fears.

inarguably evil foe, entailed a horrific loss of domestic liberty: a necessary but odious compromise.[67]

For some Anglo-American intellectuals, this pervasive sense of crisis burrowed down even deeper, moving from anxiety over the fate of the nation to an existential panic over humanity itself. As individuals confronted the large-scale machinations of mass society in its political and technological manifestations, intellectuals sought to halt the destabilization of individual personhood. The human became an increasingly fraught category, with theologians, philosophers, and humanists all vying to resuscitate its seemingly lifeless corpse. Mark Greif has analyzed this discourse – primarily in an American context, but with a steady eye toward Europe – in his recent book *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, and others have followed in his wake to study this humanistic sense of crisis in its British version.[68] What has been largely missing from this analysis is a sustained study of the role played by the works of Kierkegaard in this Anglo-American discourse of crisis, an omission worth correcting, given the high place accorded Kierkegaard by thinkers of the time.[69] Though his entrance into the English speaking world was highly mediated by better known figures, whether those who appropriated his works, like Kafka and Barth, or those who merely formed a complement to his thought, like Dostoyevsky and

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[67] MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 10. MacKay expands her consideration to two writers who openly feared fascistic takeover in England, Rex Warner and C.S. Lewis, in her article "Anti-State Fantasy and the Fiction of the 1940s," *Literature and History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 27-40. Other good considerations of the ambiguous feelings of writers toward World War II can be found in Sebastian Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), and Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II*. Knowles, as his title suggests, utilizes the conceit of wartime as purgatory for the seven authors he examines. Ellis meanwhile takes a novel and valuable approach by focusing on the year between the Munich Pact and the outbreak of war in 1939 – a time when the impending sense of crisis reached a fever pitch.

[68] Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3-26. For the British and continental sense of crisis, see Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[69] For some consideration of Kierkegaard and Anglo-American crisis, see Schilling, *Søren Kierkegaard and Anglo-American Literary Culture of the Thirties and Forties*, 134-190. See also Pattison, "From 'Prophet of the Now' to Postmodern Ironist," 238.

Nietzsche, by the time of World War II British and American writers increasingly recognized Kierkegaard as "not only the *fons et origo* of [this] type of religious thought… but also still [one surpassing] his successors and disciples in the profundity and suggestiveness of his thought."[70] It helped that Kierkegaard identified himself as a thinker aligned with societal crisis, noting in his journal that "There is a bird called the stormy-petrel, and that is what I am, when in a generation storms begin to gather, individuals of my type appear."[71] Just as Kierkegaard wrote his fiercest attacks against complacency on the cusp of the European revolutions of 1848, his first British readers found in his writings an analysis of complacency and crisis that resonated with their own sense of national and international turmoil. If, as George Pattison suggests, Kierkegaard is a figure who most fully blossoms when religious, social, and individual identities are all "stretched to their breaking point," then the Anglo-American cultural sphere in the buildup to and waging of World War II provided a most fertile ground for his emergence.[72]

Even in the first year of his new life in English, Kierkegaard became associated with crisis. The first book length study of Kierkegaard in English, E.L. Allen's *Kierkegaard: His Life and Thought*, highlights Kierkegaard's centrality to contemporary crisis, looking backwards and forward in placing him in context. Though much derided by critics, the book nevertheless captures something of the spirit of the age in dealing with Kierkegaard: "The World-war wrote in blood its commentary on his writings… For this man, more than any other in his day, saw and felt in advance the crisis that was to light on our own. The New Testament and modern life, the

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[70] Chaning-Pearce, *The Terrible Crystal*, xvii. A few recent authors have explored the rich vein of discourse surrounding theology in the literary circles of 1930s Britain, especially the "crisis theology" of Barth. For a treatment of Barth and T.S. Eliot see W. David Soud, *Divine Cartographies: God, History, and Poiesis in W.B. Yeats, David Jones, and T.S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147-216. For another treatment that places Eliot and Barth in the wider discourse of the theology of the moment, as well as in the context of Eliot's work as editor of the *Criterion*, see Domestico, *Poetry and Theology in the Modernist* Period, 18-64.
[71] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 146.
[72] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard & the Quest for Unambiguous Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), vi.

democrat's faith in human nature and the dictator's scorn for the mass – these are our oppositions, but they were his first."[73] His intuitive feel for the contours of crisis – honed in his attacks on bourgeois society and the Danish state church – became Kierkegaard's calling card to his new Anglo-American acquaintances, the *sine non qua* of his thought and his point of greatest intersection with the contemporary world.

One explanation for Kierkegaard's sudden popularity, and the sense that he represented modern humankind in a unique way, lies with Kierkegaard's ability to turn anxiety at the level of society into an existential prodding of the individual, a provocation to choice and action in the face of complacency. If interwar Europe at all conformed to Yeats' grim pronouncement that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity,"[74] then Kierkegaard, *agent provocateur* against indifference, called individual Britons to the cultural field of battle, where they could take up arms against ennui and rescue the human. In a review essay for *The Observer*, Basil de Selincourt captures this sense of personal responsibility provoked by Kierkegaard: "If there are any who feel that one of the chief dangers of our time is its complacency, its easy goingness, they will surely be grateful to a writer who expressed with genius the sense of an eternal spiritual crisis. Here are you and I, my reader, at this moment, at every moment of our lives, called to act, to act responsibly."[75] Perhaps the most striking thing about early discussions of Kierkegaard in Britain is the highly intimate tone writers take in their reactions, as if Kierkegaard were their personal confessor rather than a philosopher separated from them by a whole century. The doyen of Anglophone Kierkegaardianism himself, Walter

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[73] E.L. Allen, *Kierkegaard: His Life and Thought* (London: Stanley Nott, 1935), vii.
[74] W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 187.
[75] Basil de Selincourt, "A Black Swan: The Writings of Soren Kierkegaard," *The Observer* (London), Dec. 4, 1938: 5.

Lowrie, admits in the preface to his translation of several of Kierkegaard's later religious works that "The works which are here presented supply us with all the buffeting we can bear or profit by… I cannot read them without feeling that they are addressed principally to me."[76]

The hope of many of these pioneers of Kierkegaard was to translate or interpret Kierkegaard's works in such a way that they did not become merely one more scrap in the dustbin of history, but would act as catalysts for individual readers to change their lives.[77] Kierkegaard's talent for sharply drawn distinctions, his demand for readers to wrestle with the either/or of existence, certainly evoked strong reactions from early British readers, both positive and negative. Lowrie argues that one hallmark of Kierkegaard's greatness is the defensiveness he provokes in those who wish to retain their own beliefs in the face of his persuasiveness.[78] The poet Laura Riding, in an editorial letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, exhibits this strong negative reaction: "The clue to 'insuperable subjectivity' in Kierkegaard's philosophy is to be found in the insanity of egoism on which his philosophy is based… [his exalted reputation] is proof not of spiritual greatness, only of the furious energy of his egoism… For me a forbidding shadow of evil hangs over his work."[79] Devotion and hatred were equally likely responses to Kierkegaard's philosophy: the one reaction not possible for early British readers of Kierkegaard was indifference.

Such a highly charged reception of his works would have pleased Kierkegaard, who self-consciously embraced the role of Socratic gadfly in the Copenhagen of his day, and who, like

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[76] Walter Lowrie, preface to Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves! and Three Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), vii. Lowrie also adopts the stylistic quirk, in his monumental biography as well as the prefaces to his translations, of referring to Kierkegaard as "S.K." rather than by his full name, a space saving measure that also serves to hint at Lowrie's familiarity with the man.
[77] E.L. Allen states the purpose of his book thusly: "If, therefore, this book is welcomed as an interesting contribution to English philosophical literature, it will largely have failed of its purpose. Only if it provokes the reader – and the writer! – to personal life, will it have been worth while" (*Kierkegaard: His Life and Thought*, viii).
[78] Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 6.
[79] Laura Riding, "Søren Kierkegaard," *Times Literary Supplement* (London), Apr. 10, 1937: 275.

Karl Marx, a fellow rebel against the cult of Hegel, wished not merely to analyze the world but to change it.[80] For Kierkegaard's early Anglo-American adopters this reception was equally to be expected and embraced. Figures as different as the clergyman Lowrie and the anarchist man of letters Herbert Read exulted in a vision of Kierkegaard as a "dangerous author," one liable to disrupt the complacency of those who read him.[81] For Melville Chaning-Pearce, meanwhile, the stark choices presented by Kierkegaard cut to the heart of the notion of crisis itself. In an essay discussing Barth and Brunner, two key theological descendants of Kierkegaard, Chaning-Pearce argues for the divisive nature of crisis, a sorting function that Kierkegaard's oppositional style constantly aims at: "[Crisis] connotes at once the turning-point of an illness, reorientation of a movement of thought or life, logical discrimination between conflicting ideas, moral decision in ethics and, supremely, the demand made upon man by the 'Word of God' which is, in itself, both a separating, a 'dividing asunder' and a judgement."[82] In a world quickly approaching a crisis of division, then breaking itself upon that crisis, Kierkegaard clarified for his British readers the opportunities for positive change afforded by crisis: the chance, primarily, to reshape society without losing sight of the individual.

Beginning in the crisis of World War II, this dissertation traces the trajectory of that Kierkegaardian sense of crisis – and its aesthetic effects on writers – forward from the war through other crises of the midcentury. In Chapter One, I focus on two novelists of the war

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[80] Railing against what he sees as the increasing "objectification" of Christianity, Kierkegaard advocates for the individual appropriation of the Gospel message: "True seriousness is this: when thou readest God's Word, then in everything that thou readest, constantly say to thyself, 'It is I that am addressed, to me this is spoken'… They make God's word something impersonal, objective, a doctrine – whereas instead it is as God's voice thou shouldst hear it. Thus it is the fathers heard it, God's dreadful voice – now it sounds as objective as printed calico!" (*For Self-Examination*, 61, 64).

[81] Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, 5. Herbert Read, *A Coat of Many Colours* (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 251. Read's essay on Kierkegaard in this collection consists of an amalgamation of several review essays he had written in the 30s and 40s during Kierkegaard's initial introduction to British society.

[82] Chaning-Pearce, *The Terrible Crystal*, 59-60.

period, Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene, whose wartime novels tapped into a Kierkegaardian sense of crisis. Reading four novels of the war period – Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Time Must Have a Stop* and Greene's *Brighton Rock* and *The End of the Affair* – I examine the way these books instantiate a Kierkegaardian critique of societal complacency in their very narrative structures. Turning away equally from modernism's static characterizations and the gradualism of traditional realism, Huxley and Greene adopted a method of narrative structure inspired by Kierkegaard's idea of the stages of life. Beginning in the "aesthetic stage" of selfish immediacy, Huxley's and Greene's protagonists face the choice of entering the "ethical stage" of universal duty and, in Greene's case, the "religious stage" that embraces paradox. For Huxley and Greene, as for Kierkegaard, the transition between these stages cannot happen gradually: the next stage must be chosen by the individual in a moment of crisis. By embracing Kierkegaardian crisis in the narrative structure of their novels, Huxley and Greene challenged both the social and aesthetic norms of wartime Britain, creating works that sought to bring individual readers to their own moments of crisis and choice.

Chapter Two moves beyond the war years and into a time when the sense of crisis pulsing through British life during the war seemed to subside. Still, drastic changes loomed for British society in the aftermath of war – in religious life no less than other areas. As the complacent postwar public Christianity of British society neared its end, some authors felt its demise before that death had become common knowledge. The two Roman Catholic novelists at the center of the chapter, Muriel Spark and Flann O'Brien, brought a Kierkegaardian sense of the crisis of religious life before a public that largely viewed religious choice as a matter of indifferent custom. Connecting Spark's early novels and O'Brien's later novels to Kierkegaard's idea of "Christendom," or the practice of lackluster official Christianity, I show how Spark and

O'Brien wrote satirical novels which blended sharp critiques of Christendom with a commitment to authorial detachment, resulting in satires that work indirectly to provoke individual readers. While O'Brien used near-complete detachment in his last two novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, to lampoon the stifling effects of Irish Catholicism in its most inert and hidebound forms, Spark took up the position of the outsider to undermine both the state religion of Anglicanism and her co-religionists in the Catholic Church. Her debut novel *The Comforters*, and her third novel, *Memento Mori*, both use the concept of hidden voices to create narratives where complacent characters are roused by mysterious intrusions, and where in turn the reader must confront his or her own complacencies. Understanding these novels as satires invested in the indirect communication of stable ethical and religious messages clears the air surrounding critical reception of O'Brien's and Spark's novels – especially the question of whether or not either can be categorized as postmodern– and provides a fresh perspective on the works of two hard to classify authors.

Turning from fiction to poetry, Chapter Three unpacks the Kierkegaardian legacies of two of the best-known literary heirs of Kierkegaard, the British poet W.H. Auden and the Welsh poet-priest R.S. Thomas. Though many scholars have written on the very publicly acknowledged debts of both poets to Kierkegaard, none have yet illuminated the ways in which they drew on Kierkegaard to withstand what they saw as a crisis of poetic vocation in the midcentury. Chapter Three ties Auden's and Thomas's reception of Kierkegaard closely to the philosopher's notion of literary vocation – both its limits and its opportunities – and sees in their respective mid-career shifts in style an attempt to recapture a place for poetry that attempts to speak to the individual reader. Both men found themselves confronting what they saw as the decline of poetry in the face of mass media and the loss of an attentive audience; both tied this decline to a similar

decline in the practice of Christianity. Their mid-to-late poetry – Auden's following his move to America and return to Anglicanism, and Thomas' move from pastoral to reflective poetry – attempted to resist declining attention to poetry and religion by working on the individual reader to rouse his or her interest through difficulty. Though Auden and Thomas differed markedly in their style, Auden embracing a rococo flair for excessive verbiage and Thomas opting for a gnomic minimalism, both poets used their style as a means of making their poetry difficult, forcing the reader to engage in sustained acts of interpretation.

While the midcentury saw a robust form of indirect literature flourish in the work of the authors studied here, by century's end the maieutic seemed to have crumbled in the face of a new form of literature, what I identify as the therapeutic. In the epilog to this dissertation, I lay out the ways in which therapeutic literature, which seeks to console readers rather than challenge them, began to overshadow literature aimed at provoking the reader to growth. Reading David Lodge's novel *Therapy*, which engages repeatedly with Kierkegaard as a person and a thinker, I show how a therapeutic approach to literature changes the ways in which authors and readers view Kierkegaard, religion, and even the act of writing. Moving away from the sense of crisis which permeated midcentury encounters with Kierkegaard, Lodge embraces a version of Kierkegaard who consoles readers rather than challenging them. Putting *Therapy* in conversation with two other contemporary utilizations of Kierkegaard – Jacques Derrida's book *The Gift of Death* and Zadie Smith's essay "Some Notes on Attunement" – I trace possible future paths for the use of Kierkegaard in British literature, a future that, I argue, will tend away from the maieutic and toward the therapeutic.

# Chapter 1: Stages on Life's Way -- Kierkegaardian Narrative in the Novels of Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene

> *If I have proved nothing else with* Either-Or *at least I have proved that a work can be written in Danish literature without the warm embraces of sympathy, without the incitement of expectation, that one can work against the current, that one can be industrious without showing it, that one can collect one's thoughts in silence while almost every duffer of a student considers one an idler. Though the book itself were meaningless its genesis would be the neatest epigram I have composed on a garrulous philosophic age* – 1842 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[1]

While literary scholars have long studied the impact of the Great War on British literature of the 1920s and 30s, in recent years interest has increased in what role a sense of foreboding about a looming future war played in the literary production of the period.[2] Paul K. Saint-Amour has convincingly argued for a revised understanding of high modernist novels such as *Ulysses* and *Parade's End* in light of what he sees as a proleptic sensing of future war contained within them.[3] This sense of crisis only increased in the 1930s, as future war transformed from vague notion to impending reality.[4] As this sense of crisis spread throughout Britain, it extended its reach from the concerns of international diplomacy to the domestic sphere, creating an atmosphere of dread, what Richard Overy calls "the morbid age".[5]

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. Alec Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 111.
[2] The *locus classicus* of scholarship on the Great War and British literature remains Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). More recent efforts have tied the war more closely to modernism at the level of form. See Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[3] Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7-9.
[4] For a good sense of the literary response as war became increasingly likely in the wake of the Munich Pact and its breaking, see Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[5] Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 1-7.

Utilizing Mary A. Favret's theorization of wartime as more than a contained period, as rather a zone of affect that characterizes modernity in general, this chapter explores how the ideas of Kierkegaard provided a way of navigating the crisis of wartime for authors caught in its grip.[6] At the same time, I resist too much historical condensation, arguing that the buildup to World War II filled authors with a different sense of crisis than the aftermath of the Great War. Indeed, on my reading, the rejection of modernist aesthetics by authors following in the wake of high modernism can be explained in part by their sense that the quest for the self-contained, irresolvably ambiguous literature prized by many modernist authors – bound up with the rejection of traditional normative ethics – could not withstand the pressures of the rising tide of war. Reading a cluster of novels by Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene from the period stretching from the Spanish Civil War to the immediate post-war period (1936 to 1951), I show how Kierkegaard's concept of the stages of life, and the crisis of transition between them, animates the narrative structure of these novels, providing a sense of form that avoids both the ethical refusal of the modernist novel and the ethical optimism of Victorian and Edwardian realism. These are novels bound up in crisis that nevertheless see ethical and religious growth as potential outcomes of that crisis, yet this hope for change remains fraught with the possibility of failure. In utilizing crisis-inflected narrative forms, Huxley and Greene take up Kierkegaard's challenge of creating maieutic literature: novels that, like a midwife, push the reader towards a crisis of his or her own, a crisis that can only be navigated via an act of the will.

[6] Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 11, 18, 38.

**Huxley, Greene, and Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic, the Ethical, the Religious**

> *One should be so highly developed aesthetically that one can appreciate ethical problems aesthetically, or it's a poor look out for ethics… How many who understand the problem of ethics feel the dread and trembling?* – 1843 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[7]

In their life and work, Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene reverberated with the tremors of crisis throughout the 1930s and 40s. Though different in many ways – one a wavering Catholic, the other a mystical agnostic; one committed to England's war cause, however ambivalently, the other an absolute pacifist; one a writer of thrillers, the other a purveyor of satires – Greene and Huxley both navigated the various crises of the interwar and war periods, illustrating in their novels the sense of catastrophe that drew so many to Kierkegaard's work. Both men read and admired Kierkegaard, but beyond this direct connection participated in the wider cultural discourse surrounding his philosophy. Taken together, they provide a valuable illustration of Kierkegaard's impact on the various crises of the 1930s and 40s – not just the political, but the humanistic, religious, and aesthetic crises of the day.[8]

Having both found success in the preceding decade – Huxley as the premier satirist of the Bloomsbury set, Greene as a writer of tough but thoughtful thrillers – the two men found themselves, by the middle of the 1930s, experiencing a series of personal and professional changes, transformations pitched in the key of crisis.[9] Ironically, these upheavals – Huxley's

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[7] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 118.

[8] For the best overview of how crisis shaped transatlantic discourse in this period, see Mark Grief, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3-26. For a narrower focus on the work of certain British and continental Christian thinkers during this period, see Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[9] For Huxley's crisis of conscience, see Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* (London: Little, Brown 2002), 291-302 . For the best overview of this period of Greene's life, see Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume II: 1939-1955* (London: Penguin, 1994). Sherry is especially good at presenting the multiplicity of Greene's life as he attempts to maintain his marriage to his wife Vivien and grow deeper in his embrace of Catholicism despite his two successive, significant mistresses, Dorothy Glover and Catherine Walston. See Sherry, 19-32, 46-54, and 219-238. For a good discussion of Greene's political evolution, see Judith Adamson, *Graham Greene: The Dangerous Edge* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 1-12, 91-116.

adoption of a mystical pacifism, Greene's emotional and literary embrace of Catholicism – have often served to isolate the two authors from the bigger sense of crisis fomenting in Britain during the decade. Their chosen paths, though eccentric by the standards of the day (and perhaps distasteful to later critics), were active responses to the national crisis catalyzed by the encroachment of war, not retreats from the challenges of international instability. Far from quietist endeavors to remain undisturbed by wider society, Huxley's pacifism and Greene's Catholicism constituted attempts to wrestle with both the ascendancy of obvious evil abroad and the more subtle, but perhaps equally dangerous, deadening complacency of their domestic British society. Marina MacKay has identified a definite ambiguity among late modernists regarding the waging of World War II; wary of the encroaching powers of the British state, writers like Eliot and Woolf nevertheless made the odious compromise of supporting the war effort in the face of German aggression.[10] Though she does not use this language, MacKay in fact identifies something of an ethical turn in late modernism, a realization that definite choices must be made in life and worked through in literature.[11] Greene and Huxley anticipated this turn among the late modernists, reviving the ethical thrust of their fiction several years before the war, but neither accepted the reluctant compromise of Woolf or Eliot. They differed also from the politically engaged young poets of the Auden circle, for whom mass politics must be opposed by mass politics. Instead, both sought to preserve the privileged place of the individual while engaging society, seeing in the single subject a source for the reform or rebuke of society; in this, they

[10] Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10. MacKay expands her consideration to two writers who openly feared fascistic takeover in England, Rex Warner and C.S. Lewis, in her article "Anti-State Fantasy and the Fiction of the 1940s," *Literature and History* 24.1 (Spring 2015): 27-40.

[11] In discussing the midcentury surge in literature which interacted with religion, Allan Hepburn identifies an uptick among midcentury authors in interest in ethics, one he also identifies as in part inspired by the crisis of global politics (*A Grain of Faith: Religion in Mid-Century Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 1-10).

found a fellow traveler in Kierkegaard, defender of the individual against the modern push toward mass culture.

The ethical concerns of Huxley and Greene spilled over into worries about aesthetic value as well. For both men, their rejection of modernism contained conjoined ethical *and* aesthetic critiques of the novelistic aims of writers like Forster and Woolf, aims they portrayed as lacking something essential – what they described as a thinness or emptiness.[12] In a 1930 letter to Robert Nichols, Huxley boldly contrasts Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* with Greene's first novel, *The Man Within*, and finds Woolf wanting in comparison: "It's the difference between something full and something empty; between a writer who has a close physical contact with reality and one who is a thousand miles away and only has a telescope to look, remotely, at the world."[13] While that particular literary judgement seems eccentric in retrospect, it captures something of Huxley's growing dissatisfaction with modernist interiority, which for him led to a distancing of the author and reader from reality. Greene launches a similar critique in his 1945 essay in praise of François Mauriac, novelist of the French Catholic literary revival.[14] Tracing the decline of the English novel to the death of Henry James, Greene maintains that "With the death of James the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension: the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs Virginia Woolf and Mr E.M. Forster wandered like

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[12] In this chapter I will use Woolf as a primary stand in for the tendencies of modernism rejected by Greene and Huxley. I choose her in part because, in her essays, she offers one of the most complete visions in this period of what literature should do, and in part because both authors explicitly set themselves against her vision of literature.
[13] Aldous Huxley, *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. Grover Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 330. A year later, recommending reading to Flora Strouse, Huxley exhorts her, "If you want to read a *good* book, get *The Castle* by Kafka… it makes the other German novelists, even Mann, look pretty thin and insubstantial. For me it's one of the most important books of this time" (*Letters,* 345).
[14] For more on Greene and Mauriac, see Bernard C. Swift, "'The Dangerous Edge of Things': Mauriac, Greene, and the Ideal of the Catholic Novel," *Journal of European Studies* xxii (1992): 115-124.

cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin."[15] For both men, then, the turn to interiority ironically leads to a loss of the subject – with no outer world, no possibility of meaningful moral choice, the subject of the modernist novel disappears into unreality. Fair or not, this critique of interiority drives the reactions of both authors to modernism, leading them to seek other means of reconciling life and art.[16]

Critics have long recognized the disconnect between modernist writers and the novelists who came of age in the 1930s. But a standard account like Michael Gorra's, that emphasizes the fragmentary nature of these later novels, and argues that the authors avoided ideas of the soul and interiority entirely until the pressures of World War II forced them to reconsider, fails to recognize the sustained interest in subjectivity in novelists like Huxley and Greene.[17] Despite the

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[15] Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 115.

[16] Huxley and Greene anticipated Georg Lukács, who saw in interiority a repudiation of history and the outside world. Ironically, Lukács blames Kierkegaard in part for the divorce of action from inner meaning, though his interpretation stems more from existentialist appropriations of Kierkegaard than the writings themselves (*The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander [London: Merlin Press, 1963], 27). Following Lukács, Peter Widdowson claims that the uncertain direction of fiction in the 30s constitutes a "recognition of the embattlement of liberal-bourgeois individualism" ("Between the Acts? English Fiction in the Thirties," in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, ed. Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies, and Carole Snee [London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979], 134). More contemporary scholarship has complicated this standard picture of modernist interiority. For works that reinforce the notion of modernist interiority as purely subjective and fluid, see Tony E. Jackson, *The Subject of Modernism: Narrative Alterations in the Fiction of Eliot, Conrad, Woolf, and Joyce* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Gabriele Schwab, *Subjects without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). However, Victoria Rosner argues for a strong connection between fictional interiority and the real world (*Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], 11-12). Michael Levenson argues that, for all their desire to inhabit new forms, modernist writers also clung to a nostalgic sense of Victorian character development, creating a sense of conflict between objectivity and subjectivity in their works (*Modernism and the Fate of Individuality* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], xiii, 170-8). Given that Huxley and Greene both take Woolf as their main target, it seems relevant to note the highly gendered nature of discussions of interiority (see Katz, Tamar, *Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000], 2-3, 169-197).

[17] Michael Gorra, *The English Novel at Mid-Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 8-10. Unsurprisingly, Gorra's account, valuable as it is in many respects, presents a distorted picture by ignoring Huxley entirely, and badly misinterpreting Greene. For instance, his claim that "Religion for Greene served primarily as a way to persuade himself that his characters do indeed have the emotional grandeur he wants them to have" is an especially egregious example of the tendency to read religion out of the contemporary novel (122). For a socialist reading of the inner tension of 30s novels – one that sees these novels as moving away from the ür-individualism of modernism toward a loss of the individual, whose ghost nevertheless remains – see Widdowson, "Between the Acts? English Fiction in the Thirties," 134-5.

apparent paradox that a philosopher best known for his defense of subjectivity should fuel the critics of interiority in the novel, I argue that Kierkegaard's philosophy provided an important way out for Greene and Huxley as they wrestled with the dual crises of humanism and the novel. In particular, Kierkegaard's notion of the stages of life – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – and the possibility of passing from one stage to another, gave them a means to critique what they saw as the emptiness of their contemporaries without artificially resolving the inner tensions of their work. What emerges thematically and, ultimately, narratively in the work of Huxley and Greene in this period is a Kierkegaardian dialectic that both provides for and complicates the development of the individual subject.

While it is true that Kierkegaard relentlessly stresses the primacy of the individual, his vision of inwardness and subjectivity meshes poorly with the modernist sense of aesthetic interiority. Kierkegaard in fact outlines more than one type of interiority, an aesthetic interiority and the superior interiority of the religious – and for him only religious inwardness will do. This distinction sets him in stark contrast to the philosophy of Nietzsche, who became perhaps *the* signal philosopher of British modernism, and whose emphasis on a mysterious, almost mystical sense of the individual appealed to authors like D.H. Lawrence and Woolf.[18] For the modernists following Nietzsche, inwardness was always aesthetic, and as a result static and mysterious.[19] According to Kierkegaard, however, true inwardness must be *developed* in the individual, and this premise suggests different stages of human life. In his work, Kierkegaard labels these stages,

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[18] For an early discussion of Nietzsche and modernism see Patrick Bridgwater, *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972). For a later critique of Bridgwater, see Alexandra Emmanuel, *The Literary Reception of Nietzschean Ideas in Relation to Selected Works of Modernist Literature* (Dissertation: The University of Leeds, 2010). Emmanuel helpfully focuses on the role of little magazines in the spread of Nietzsche's influence in England (14-72).

[19] Describing her imagined subject of modernist writing, Woolf says in her essay "Character in Fiction" that "Mrs Brown is eternal, Mrs Brown is human nature, Mrs Brown changes only on the surface" (*Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 47).

or spheres, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.[20] The aesthetic stage – the beginning stage, and the one most people remain in throughout their lives – features the inwardness of immediacy, a sensuality driven by egoism, and a sense of disconnect from others. It is this inwardness that Huxley and Greene detect in their modernist forbearers. The ethical stage moves outward, subsuming inner life within the dictates of the universal, and stressing a sense of duty. Finally, the religious stage involves a reclaiming of inwardness through embrace of paradox and the absurd; the religious person becomes a stumbling block to those who live life by the external light of the ethical or the inner glow of the aesthetic.

Unlike other divisions of life, however, such as Shakespeare's seven ages of man, no inevitable movement between the three spheres exists, and Kierkegaard does not envision an organic development or progression from one to the other. Instead, the spheres are paradoxically marked by both simultaneity and rupture: a person might incorporate elements of multiple spheres at once, though one will dominate; yet the movement from one to another comes not through the gradual building of habits or character, but in a momentous leap taken in "the instant". Walter Lowrie lays out these distinctions very clearly in his introduction to *Stages on Life's Way*, one of Kierkegaard's works that deals with the stages in detail, and a similar sense of Kierkegaard's stages permeates early scholarship in English.[21] Nearly every early critical work

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[20] Kierkegaard develops the idea of the stages in several major works. I am focusing here on *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*.

[21] Lowrie: "We need in fact to be warned not to regard the three stages as a prescribed curriculum which one must pass through in advancing from youth to age. Such is not S.K.'s meaning. He is not so foolish as to think that one must be an unhappy exception like Quidam (or like himself) in order to attain the religious stage – any more than one must first be a seducer in order to become a proper married man like the Judge. Neither does he represent that one stage must be definitely left behind before a man enters upon the next. He affirms in fact of the aesthetic that it is never superseded but only 'dethroned.' We have seen that the Judge had by no means superseded it, although he is here presented as an example of the ethical; and we have seen that the ethical is described as a transitional stage, that is, one in which a man's position is not consolidated; one might almost venture to think of it as a line across which one steps in the act of repentance. But apart from that line there is no definite delimitation of the spheres, and in 'existence' they overlap. S.K. defines the three spheres only in the briefest and most general terms, but he is copious in depicting the characters who exemplify them. They do not exemplify any stage purely, as a logical system would

on Kierkegaard discusses the stages, regarding them as a key contribution of Kierkegaard's thought.[22] As he emerged in Anglo-American intellectual discourse, then, Kierkegaard became associated closely with this idea of the stages of existence, as well as two related concepts: the instant and the leap. The instant, for Kierkegaard, constitutes a slice of eternity intersecting the temporal, and is the moment when the individual freely chooses to move between stages – or remain where they are. The leap is that action taken whereby the individual moves from one stage to another, especially between the ethical and the religious stage, and does so through an act of will, rather than reasoned contemplation. To complicate matters, however, neither the leap nor the instant exists as a single point of time. Rather, each presents to the religious individual a continuous series of choices; every moment the religious individual must choose to remain in faith.[23] Indeed, the leap, as figured in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, is not the singular leap across a chasm, but rather the dancer's repeated leap into the air, from which the dancer lands again without wavering. Faith, then, for Kierkegaard, is regarded as a "task for a lifetime," not a single choice followed by the inertia of belief.[24]

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require, for they represent the existential possibilities which lie between immediacy and spirit. The logical delimitation of the spheres is confounded by the movement in which each individual is involved, the *direction* of this movement is the prime consideration, and this is aptly indicated by the word 'stages'" (Introduction to Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Walter Lowrie [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940], 9).

[22] In addition to Lowrie, who discusses the stages in his biography as well as his preface to *Stages*, the aesthetic, ethical, and religious come under discussion in Allen, *Kierkegaard: His Life and Thought*, 121-134; James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 42-9; Regis Jolivet, *Introduction to Kierkegaard*, trans. W.H. Barber (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1949), 124-205; and comprise a section in Auden's compendium of Kierkegaard quotes, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, ed. W.H. Auden (New York: David McKay Company, 1952), 56-144, to name but a few.

[23] Lowrie recognizes this, while also positing the leap as something that can occur between the aesthetic and ethical stages: "S.K. insists so much upon the necessity of making a 'leap' from the aesthetical to the ethical stage that we may be prompted to suppose that his own moral reformation was accomplished in an instant. But this was very far from being his experience. The resolution itself, the free act, the decisive choice in the face of an either/or, is indeed accomplished in an instant. But the 'instant', according to S.K., is not an infinitesimal fraction of time but a fraction of eternity. And the individual who in that 'acceptable time' has made his choice is not thereupon translated into eternity, but is still subject to the vicissitudes of ordinary clock time and obliged to work out his salvation with fear and trembling" (*Kierkegaard*, 152).

[24] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Robert Payne (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), xiii. Later in *Fear and Trembling*, the fictional author of the work, Johannes de Silentio, suggests that the life of the "knight of

Without the instantaneous leap, humans cannot, in Kierkegaard's view, become truly individual, something T.H. Croxall noticed in an early essay interpreting Kierkegaard for the British public.[25] This leap, though sometimes subject to distortion, became embedded in the public's conception of Kierkegaard, inspiring, among other artifacts, W.H. Auden's 1940 poem "Leap Before You Look."[26] The stages, the instant, and the leap were all prevalent enough in the cultural discourse of the time to be available to Huxley and Greene, regardless of how much – or how carefully – they read Kierkegaard's actual words. And it was the powerful broad strokes of Kierkegaard's way of thinking, rather than the minute details, that mattered most to the two authors as they pursued their work of this period. Both men, I argue, were indebted to Kierkegaard's conception of ruptured personal development, seeing in it a way out of the impasses of contemporary malaise and modernist aesthetics.[27] While they both resisted what they saw as the thin interiority of writers such as Woolf, they also knew they could not return to the tenets of realism. Instead, Kierkegaard provided a way forward by pointing to the power of dialectic as a novelistic tool. Avoiding both the natural progression of realism and the pessimistic

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faith" is deceptive, because despite an outer appearance of tranquility, "Every moment of his life he purchases his leisure at the highest price; for he makes not the least movement except by virtue of the absurd" (51).

[25] "Without decision there can be no 'existence,' in Kierkegaard's sense of the term: and without existence there is, he maintains, no freedom, no re-integration of the personality, no individuality… only in the decisive personal act of ethical or religious choice wherein, by a daring spiritual leap, a man acquires full selfhood as an 'existing individual' – only by such an act, though it be a leap in the dark, can freedom be won" (T.H. Croxall, "Choose, Leap and Be Free," *Times Literary Supplement* (London), Mar. 9, 1946: 109).

[26] The final stanza of this poem highlights the sense of isolation and anxiety inherent in the decision to leap: "A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep/Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:/Although I love you, you will have to leap;/Our dream of safety has to disappear." (W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, [New York: Vintage, 1991], 313). Auden's use of "ten thousand fathoms" is a direct echo of Kierkegaard's oft-repeated phrase that faith is like being out "over seventy-thousand fathoms of water" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 182).

[27] Modernist literature had its own aesthetics of crisis. See Alan Wilde, "Modernism and the Aesthetics of Crisis," *Contemporary Literature* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 15, 23. Wilde is helpful here in differentiating between the "absolute irony" of high modernism and the "relative irony" of the 1930s, and a corresponding shift from crisis to what he terms anxiety (41, 45). Though of course I differ from Wilde regarding the continuation of crisis, he description of a move away from absolute irony – a paradox that paralyzes – toward relative irony provides a useful heuristic for considering the way in which Huxley and Greene utilize a dialectic that propels the reader forward, rather than stalling out.

anti-climax of modernism, Huxley and Greene utilized Kierkegaardian dialectics to move their characters through stages of life; these are narratives rife with crisis, but crisis that provides a way out through deliberate choice.

The characters in their novels of this period instantiate – like Kierkegaard's own fictional authors – the different stages of life. Both Huxley and Greene create characters who embody the selfish complacency of the aesthetic stage and the dutiful steadiness of the ethical stage; Greene also provides several characters who embrace the paradox of the religious stage. In building a sense of the three stages of life into the narrative structure of their novels, Huxley and Greene avoid the modernist preference for circumscribed character development and impressionistic portraiture; not for them the novel of the single day, a la *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Their characters can and do change, become better, even, through deliberate choice. At the same time, Huxley and Greene avoid the granular gradualism of the realist novel. In a sense, they agree with modernist critiques of the falsity of realism, most famously put forth in Woolf's essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown". To the extent that these characters are able to move from one stage of life to another, they do so in single "instants" of crisis, moments where reality slows down and dilates, rather than undergoing a natural development over a long period. Huxley and Greene thus reject both sides of Woolf's assessment that "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."[28] The symmetrical progression of realist narrative will not do, but neither will the hazy halo of modernist consciousness.

Their embrace of crisis narrative suggests another way in which Huxley and Greene reject both realist and modernist aesthetics regarding the aim of literature itself. In her essay

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[28] Woolf, *Selected Essays*, 9.

"Character and Fiction" Woolf criticizes the Edwardian novelists for producing works that do not exist as self-contained aesthetic objects, books that require "That the reader should finish them, actively and practically, for himself" – in Woolf's view, by engaging in some act of social reform.[29] In contrast, Woolf praises Sterne and Austen as creators of self-contained works, and aims to create fiction of this kind. As we shall see, the novels of Greene and Huxley reject this view, where the reader merely admires a polished *object d'art*, instead crafting texts where the reader must become an active participant. While on occasion Huxley's books especially seems to conform to Woolf's description of the Edwardian novel as prompting direct social action, on the whole the novels of these two authors during this period elicit a response of a different kind: an intense personal wrestling with ethical ideas. Whereas Woolf sees aesthetic self-sufficiency as a means for novels to avoid provoking social action, Greene and Huxley employ a deliberate insufficiency in their novels to elicit from readers not the comparatively easy action of "join[ing] a society or, more desperately, [writing] a cheque,"[30] but the more difficult task of self-examination.

In arguing for a Kierkegaardian understanding of the work of Huxley and Greene in this period, I push back against the merely biographical readings of these novelists that would see their work during this decade as the straightforward expression of eccentric personal interests – Huxley's mystical pacifism or Greene's burgeoning Catholicism – and instead see their novels expressing a broader view that works through the aesthetics of crisis. No less than the political poets of the Auden circle, or the late work of Eliot and Woolf, Huxley and Greene responded in their fiction of the 30s and 40s to the pressures of wartime imminent and wartime immanent.

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[29] Ibid, 44.
[30] Ibid, 44.

That they did so in the language of Kierkegaard – with instants of crisis provoking their characters to leap between stages – suggests the deep receptiveness of British culture at this moment to a thinker who identified the crisis conditions of modernity with a gimlet eye, yet did not despair of escaping crisis, but found in crisis time hope for growth at the level of the individual.

## Wartime Imminent: Huxley and Greene in the late 1930s

> *When the truth conquers with the help of 10,000 yelling men – even supposing that that which is victorious is a truth: with the form and manner of the victory a far greater untruth is victorious* – 1848 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[31]

In their novels that immediately precede World War II, both Huxley and Greene exhibit a keen awareness of the feeling of wartime, despite a lack of real-world conflict. Both, in fact, link this wartime feeling to a struggle within British society for a new way forward. Unsatisfied with the easy complacency of popular culture, and the exquisite despair of writers like Woolf, Greene and Huxley seek to articulate a vision of society and literature that rejects both the myopic pleasures of the masses and the cultivated nihilism of the Bloomsbury set. While Greene seems content, in his 1938 novel *Brighton Rock*, to etch with careful detail the picture of an age trapped by its own dread and despair, Huxley's 1936 novel *Eyeless in Gaza* holds on to the hope that individuals might halt society's plunge toward destruction. Both novels engage in a Kierkegaardian attempt to turn the reader's attention away from externals and toward internal ethical struggle, using their characters as a mirror for the complacency of British society in the 1930s.

To this ethical end, both novels utilize narrative techniques that respond to but deviate

[31] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 234.

from the tenets of both realism and modernism. In mixing realist narrative progression with the modernist dilation of individual moments, Huxley and Greene craft narrative structures capable of showing the reader how characters might, in the "instant" that marks the intersection of linear and non-linear time, make the leap between stages of life. *Brighton Rock* places its realist and dilated strands in dialectic juxtaposition with each other, in the process revealing the irony that realism contains some of the formlessness of modernist technique, while moments of dilation supply their own accelerating progression toward an end. Huxley, meanwhile, utilizes anachrony in *Eyeless in Gaza* to undermine what he sees as the purposeless parataxis of writers like Woolf; the protagonist of the book moves from understanding his life as a series of random moments to grasping the ethical shape, or lack thereof, of his past. By emphasizing crisis at the level of narrative structure, Huxley and Greene avoid direct, didactic communication about ethics or faith, crafting instead fiction that prompts the reader to consider ethical or religious change indirectly.

What distinguishes *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Brighton Rock* from the novels Greene and Huxley wrote in the midst and aftermath of World War II – novels that equally engage with the intellectual inheritance of Kierkegaard – is the sense these earlier novels capture of hovering at the edge of crisis. While the later books capture the feeling of wartime thrust upon their characters, for the protagonists of these 30s novels war remains only a possibility, however close and real. This sense of possibility heightens the ethical stakes of the books. For Huxley, pacifism in *Eyeless in Gaza* represents a distinct path for avoiding war; though he thinks change must begin at the level of the individual, he hopes that individuals might inspire a rising tide of peace through the example they set of ethical choice. *Brighton Rock* eschews optimism in favor of close observation, sketching a picture of pre-war Britain that emphasizes the inability of

individuals to escape their moral torpor. These books are, as Kierkegaard once described his own life and work, stormy-petrels that gather as the clouds of international crisis reach critical mass;[32] the anxiety found in them will reach its breaking point in the war, pouring forth in the novels of the war period.

## Going too Far: *Brighton Rock*

> *"One sometimes chances upon novels in which certain characters represent opposing views of life. It usually ends by one of them convincing the other. Instead of these views being allowed to speak for themselves, the reader is enriched by being told the historical result, that one has convinced the other. I regard it as fortunate that these papers contain no such information"* – Victor Eremita*, Either/Or*[33]

Greene's connection to Kierkegaard during the pre-war and wartime years is somewhat hard to trace. Though in later life Greene frequently references his admiration for Kierkegaard, it is unclear at what stage he actually read the philosopher's works.[34] Indeed, in a 1949 interview, he dismisses any direct influence from Kierkegaard, among others, saying that any confluence of his work with Kierkegaard's came about only as a result of the charged atmosphere of wartime Britain.[35] There are reasons to doubt the veracity of this statement,[36] but again, Greene's direct

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[32] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 146.
[33] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Volume I*, trans. by David F. Swenson and Lillian M. Swenson (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1944), 12. Eremita is the fictional author who acts as editor of *Either/Or*, bringing together the aesthetic musings of A with the ethical ruminations of B.
[34] For Greene's comments on Kierkegaard, see Maria Couto, *Graham Greene: On the Frontier* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 225. Anne T. Salvatore notes, in her monograph on Kierkegaard and Greene, that Greene's personal correspondence with her affirms his admiration for Kierkegaard (*Greene and Kierkegaard: The Discourse of Belief* [Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1988], xiv-xv). It's also worth noting that the first volume of Greene's memoirs, *A Sort of Life*, features an epigraph from Kierkegaard.
[35] *Conversations with Graham Greene*, ed. Henry J. Donaghy (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 21-22.
[36] Not least of which is Greene's admission to Marie-Francoise Allain that he frequently lies to interviewers about details of his work (*The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene*, trans. Guido Waldman [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983], 25). One year after the 1949 interview, Robert Osterman profiled Greene and, over the course of their conversation, Greene reveals a good knowledge of Kafka, one of the figures he dismissed previously as having had no influence on him (*Conversations with Graham Greene*, 30). Given the tight links between Kafka and Kierkegaard during this period, it is reasonable to assume that Greene would also have had at least a conceptual understanding of Kierkegaard. Furthermore, as I will show below, Greene's 1951 novel *The End of the Affair* contains explicit mention of the Kierkegaardian concept of the leap.

interactions with Kierkegaard in this period matter less than the ways in which Greene expresses a sense of crisis, and of movements through the stages of life, that illustrate the broader resonance of Kierkegaard's work in this period, as well as demonstrate the existing affinities between his fiction and Kierkegaard's philosophy, affinities that drew him more explicitly to Kierkegaard later in life. Other critics have noticed the shared interests and sympathies of Kierkegaard and Greene, but little work has been done to connect this overlap with the broader sense of cultural crisis rippling through pre-war and wartime Britain.[37] Greene's 1938 novel *Brighton Rock* captures the structure of feeling of perpetual wartime crisis, and portrays a stark contrast between the indifference afflicting society and the potential for individuals to escape through deliberate choice. In doing so, the book provides an insightful characterization of life lived in Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of sensual immediacy, while hinting at the superiority of the religious embrace of the absurd.

*Brighton Rock* has proved to be one of Greene's most enduring, and most controversial, novels.[38] Part of the book's success lies in the way it bridges Greene's generic interest in thrillers with the philosophical ruminations of his more serious works. The book follows Pinkie, a young gang leader in Brighton responsible for the murder of Hale, a journalist, during a turf war with another gang. Ida, a woman who met Hale just before his death, becomes obsessed with hunting down his killer, and gradually narrows in on Pinkie, simultaneously trying to break Pinkie's spell over Rose, the innocent young waitress whom Pinkie marries to cover his tracks. Greene toggles

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[37] Salvatore's *Greene and Kierkegaard: The Discourse of Belief* gives the fullest reading of Greene as a Kierkegaardian author. In an article related to that book, Salvatore argues for *The End of the Affair* as the most Kierkegaardian of Greene's works ("Socratic Midwifery: Greene and Kierkegaard," *College Literature* 12, no. 1 (1985): 28-9). For a treatment of "the leap" in Greene, see Mark J. Bosco, S.J., *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-8.

[38] Harold Bloom, introducing a collection dedicated to Greene criticism, suggests that the book will be Greene's only lasting contribution to literature, but still maintains a decided ambiguity about the book. See Harold Bloom, introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Graham Greene*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 1, 4.

between Ida's quest for justice and the battle within Pinkie's own soul, creating the most complete marriage between inner and outer conflict of his career. This narrative dialectic exposes the inadequacy of both characters, satirizing Ida's concern with externalities while simultaneously critiquing Pinkie's destructive selfishness. In fact, though opposed in many ways, Pinkie and Ida are united in their limited vision of life; they both remain in the immediacy of Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, while expressing its different sides – Ida the sensuous immediacy of the un-self-aware aesthetic, Pinkie the despairing boredom of the self-aware.

A clearer understanding of the very Kierkegaardian dialectic at play between Ida and Pinkie helps clarify longstanding critical ambivalences regarding the novel's stance toward its characters. *Brighton Rock* has proved controversial for its depiction of Pinkie, who seemingly exists in a plane beyond that of other characters by virtue of his attachment to Catholicism. This has sometimes been put forward as evidence of Greene's partisanship, most famously by George Orwell.[39] The contrast between Pinkie, who negatively illustrates the power of Catholicism through his rejection of it, and Ida, an incarnation of bourgeois values, does suggest that Greene sees a stark bifurcation between the world and the church, but this divide does not fall as neatly as critics like Orwell suggest.[40] Put another way, the main difference between Pinkie and Ida is not so much their particular religious beliefs as their attitude toward crisis. Pinkie lives his whole life in crisis but remains unable to make the decisive change that would pull him out, while Ida

[39] Orwell's essay "The Sanctified Sinner" is really a review of Greene's 1948 novel *The Heart of the Matter*, but he lumps *Brighton Rock* in with that book as an example of what he sees as Greene's growing tendency to embrace "the cult of the sanctified sinner," the idea that it is better to be a damned Catholic than a virtuous pagan ("The Sanctified Sinner," in *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Samuel Hynes [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973], 107-8).

[40] On the conflictedness of Greene's position toward modernity, see Karl O'Hanlon, "Antimodernism and Religious Modernity in Brighton Rock: The Divided Mind of Graham Greene," in *Graham Greene: un écrivain dans le siècle*, ed. Vincent Giroud (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comte, 2014), 54. Peter A. Sinclair argues for a more equitable narrative balance between Pinkie and Ida ("Graham Greene and Christian Despair: Tragic Aesthetics in Brighton Rock and The Heart of the Matter," *Renascence* 63, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 133-4).

floats through life in a complacent haze, until the crisis of Hale's death motivates her to action. It is not so much that Pinkie's attitude to life is superior to Ida's as it is more expressive of contemporary pressures. Ida's sense of uprightness, her chumminess, even her languidly hypocritical dalliances with married men, seem almost Victorian next to the raw nervous energy of Pinkie, who recoils in disgust at sexual intercourse while dispensing violence and cruelty with a manic glee. Here the age gap matters: the warm, comfortable world of middle-aged Ida appears unreal next to the hardness of life experienced by Pinkie and his rising cohort.

At the same time, Pinkie never comes across as superior to Ida. Here the biographical reading of Greene's fiction proves especially misleading: it is a mistake to assume that, simply because Pinkie is a lapsed Catholic, Greene sets him out as an exemplar of any sort. Rather, Pinkie is an instantiation of a worldview, of a structure of feeling, one *Brighton Rock* examines without endorsing. He is, in fact, an analogue to A, the Aesthete who writes part one of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* – a character able to critique the shortcomings of his culture without being able to escape them.[41] Rather than advocating for the superiority of evil Catholics over virtuous pagans, *Brighton Rock* opposes two characters with irreconcilable worldviews – each indecipherable to the other – while revealing the futility of both. In an act of narrative sleight-of-hand, *Brighton Rock's* final chapter exposes the responses of both Pinkie and Ida to life in a fallen world as inadequate, instead suggesting the religious embrace of absurdity as a way out of the inertia of the aesthetic. This narrative twist aligns the structure of Greene's novel with *Either/Or*, where the dialectic between the aesthetic and the ethical gets undermined at book's close by a sermon bearing the title "The Edifying in the Thought that against God We Are

[41] One of the best readings of the antagonism between Pinkie and Ida comes in Roger Sharrock, *Saints, Sinners, and Comedians: The Novels of Graham Greene* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 88-91, where Sharrock provides a fuller history to the idea of the "holy sinner" who exposes the sham of respectable Christianity, a concept whose history includes Kierkegaard.

Always in the Wrong". Though it is highly unlikely Greene had encountered *Either/Or* at the time of writing *Brighton Rock*,[42] his novel's affinity for the contours of that work points to Greene's sensitivity to the vibrations of crisis – a crisis which, as we have seen, Kierkegaard helped give a vocabulary to in the build up to World War II.

Greene's Kierkegaardian sympathies emerge clearly in *Brighton Rock* through the novel's contrast between the individual and mass society. At the book's beginning, Hale watches as a crowd of tourists "Uncoil[s] endlessly past him, like a twisted piece of wire."[43] For Hale the crowd provides cover, the ability to disappear as an individual, an asset as he attempts to evade Pinkie and his henchmen; yet the current of the book as a whole strains against the crowd as an enervating force.[44] Hale represents the modern constituent of mass society, an almost featureless cipher floating from town to town without attachment in his role as a clue planter for a newspaper contest. His brief connection with Ida matches like with like, as she self-describes as a "Woman of the people" who cries at the movies and feels moved by the very word tragedy.[45] The various men Ida entertains throughout the book share Hale's nonentity, their lack of genuine passion marking them as interchangeable faces in the crowd. Ida herself exists in a perpetual middle, not experiencing highs or lows, but only the small comforts of "The soft gluey mouth affixed in taxis, the warm handclasp in cinemas, the only reward there was," pleasures to which she adds the act of vengeance, which she categorizes as "fun".[46] A little bit of fun: this is the best Ida hopes for in life – never doing anything too bad, never experiencing anything too grand. Ida

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[42] The English translation of Volume I did not appear until 1944, and, unlike with Huxley, there is no evidence to suggest that Greene might have encountered the German or French translations.
[43] Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 4.
[44] Valentine Cunningham notes the tension between crowd and individual in 1930s Britain, a tension felt especially, he argues, by writers (*British Writers of the Thirties* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], 8).
[45] Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 31.
[46] Ibid, 36. See Sinclair, "Graham Greene and Christian Despair," 135, for a picture of how Ida's quest serves mostly to satisfy her own immediate desires.

sounds a great deal like the bourgeois citizens A attacks in *Either/Or*, bemoaning the lack of willingness for anyone to commit a great sin or take a big risk.[47] Though Ida is the most fully sketched example of this lack of passion in *Brighton Rock*, the same malaise afflicts many of the characters. As one of Pinkie's associates sums up, "The world's all right if you don't go too far."[48] These characters, Ida especially, resemble protagonists of modernist literature such as Leopold Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway. They live life day to day, with no inkling of any bigger stakes. In the book's attack on Ida's lackadaisical approach to life, Greene unites an ethical and aesthetic critique: Ida's lack of ethical vision marks her as a caricature of the "flat characters" Greene derides in the work of Woolf and Forster.

If Ida resembles the bourgeois materialists derided by A for having thoughts that are "Thin and flimsy… too paltry to be sinful,"[49] then Pinkie behaves suspiciously like A himself, able to detect the malaise around him but unable to escape from it. Pinkie inherits from his religion a sense of perpetual crisis, a world in which heaven and hell (or at least hell), good and evil have the weight of reality. Critics like Orwell have chafed at this depiction of Catholicism as somehow more alive than "virtuous paganism," but given the book's relative disinterest in theological minutiae, Greene's sketch focuses not so much on Catholicism per se as on the phenomenological experience of crisis that it allows.[50] While attempts to dismiss the Catholic elements of Greene's fiction as mere plot devices go too far, the raking through of his Catholic novels for detailed theological material misses the main thrust of Catholicism's presence in the

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[47] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 17. For Ida as representative of Greene's attack on bourgeois society, see O'Hanlon, "Antimodernism and Religious Modernity in Brighton Rock," 56-7.
[48] Greene, *Brighton Rock,* 182.
[49] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 22.
[50] For Greene's Catholicism as a site of crisis, see Bosco, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*, 19.

novels, as an occasion for crisis, and the forcing of choices upon characters.[51] Hence the opposition *Brighton Rock* sets up between right and wrong (embodied by Ida) and good and evil (Pinkie and Rose).[52] What critics like Orwell miss in the book's depiction of Pinkie is that *Brighton Rock* does not elevate Pinkie for choosing evil, but rather for his recognition of his own impossible situation. Pinkie, in choosing despair,[53] awakens to the reality of contemporary life, which demands paradoxical choices at every turn. While characters like Ida float along with the deadening currents of modern mass society, Pinkie recognizes the reality of crisis in the midst of the "morbid age"; this is why Rose describes Ida as "ignorant" in her unrecognition of spiritual realities, and the book's narration compares Ida to "The typical Englishwoman abroad," uncomprehending as she bumps up against the real material of life.[54]

The novel's boldest upending of convention, then, involves its suggestion that belief in supernatural ethics and eternal punishment, far from idealism, might in fact be the most realistic

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[51] For Catholicism as a merely formal element, see Gorra, *The English Novel at Mid-Century*, 122. A somewhat more balanced version of this argument occurs in Murray Roston, *Graham Greene's Narrative Strategies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5-6, where Roston argues that the religious characters work both to overcome the midcentury distaste for heroes, and to elicit sympathy from the reader for religious points of view. Sinclair provides an argument close to mine when he asserts that for Greene, literature works against the tidy edges of theology to provide a lived in experience of belief (Sinclair, "Graham Greene and Christian Despair," 131).

[52] Merold Westphal argues that one of Kierkegaard's critiques of mass society centers on society's rejection of good and evil in favor of the boring and the interesting, an interesting parallel both to the world of *Brighton Rock* and the satires of Huxley. Indeed, though she speaks of right and wrong, Ida more often seems driven by the desire for the interesting and the avoidance of boredom. See Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 51.

[53] Kierkegaard's fullest discussion of despair comes in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where fictional author Anti-Climacus offers a thorough taxonomy of the many types of despair. Interestingly, Anti-Climacus connects greater self-awareness in despair with a more thorough enmeshment in its structures; to be more aware of the reasons you have to despair means to be closer to the demonic despair of damnation, but paradoxically also closer to faith. This paradox proves insightful in the case of Pinkie: trapped in despair, fully aware of his own evil, he is simultaneously closer to the demonic than Ida, and better off, insofar as he more clearly recognizes his position.

[54] Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 121, 135. Though it's almost certain Greene had not read *Either/Or* before writing *Brighton Rock*, this last passage has an interesting parallel in Kierkegaard's book, where A describes Englishmen as the paradigm of boredom: "Occasionally, however, you meet a traveling Englishman who is, as it were, the incarnation of this genial aptitude – a heavy, immovable animal, whose entire language exhausts its riches in a single word of one syllable, an interjection by which he signifies his deepest admiration and his supreme indifference, admiration and indifference having been neutralized in the unity of boredom. No other nation produces such miracles of nature; every other national will always show himself a little more vivacious, not so absolutely still-born" (238).

viewpoint of all, in light of the crisis-plagued reality of life in the interwar period. The gang wars of Brighton – with Colleoni's rival gang slowly crowding out Pinkie's for operational *lebensraum* – microcosmically portray the turmoil of British and international uncertainty, a turmoil from which, as the war would soon demonstrate, it proves difficult to escape unscathed. Pinkie does not transform into a hero; he makes the choice available to him, hampered as he is by his own lack of imagination, and his sinking into despair, but makes it with open eyes.[55] His constant refrain to himself, "Between the stirrup and the ground," drives home the choice available at any moment: even in the "instant" before death he might reject evil and choose the good, but he cannot bring himself to do so. To use Kierkegaardian language, Pinkie is "better off" than Ida insofar as he recognizes his own continually bubbling crisis, and can therefore – up to his death, or perhaps even beyond – make a choice to become a self, to leap in the instant beyond immediacy. Significantly, however, he never makes this leap over the course of the novel. Instead, he repeatedly bumps up against small moments that afford him the opportunity to leap, but remains imprisoned by his own indifference. Little bursts of conscience that form moments of narrative crisis impede on Pinkie throughout the book, often prompted by the presence of music. Sitting in a movie theater, he experiences one of these crisis points:

> Suddenly, inexplicably, the Boy began to weep. He shut his eyes to hold in his tears, but the music went on – it was like a vision of release to an imprisoned man. He felt constriction and saw – hopelessly out of reach – a limitless freedom: no fear, no hatred, no envy. It was as if he were dead and were remembering the effect of a good confession, the words of absolution: but being dead it was a memory only – he couldn't experience contrition – the ribs of his body were like steel bands which held him down to eternal unrepentance" (196)

[55] The book describes Pinkie's strength as a gangster emanating from his lack of imagination, his inability to see through other people's eyes (Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 45). For a consideration of despair in *Brighton Rock*, see Sinclair, "Graham Greene and Christian Despair," 132.

Like Moses glimpsing Canaan, Pinkie can see a life for himself freed of fear, hatred, and envy, a life removed from the despair of the aesthetic, but it remains "hopelessly out of reach," because he himself cannot dare to hope in the absurd. Even at book's end, as he prepares to trick Rose into committing suicide, he feels the "prowling presence of pity" that might pull him back from despair, but he cannot bring himself to step back from the edge.[56] In these and other moments of crisis Pinkie hangs suspended, between the stirrup and the ground, and the reader can see, as in slow motion, the agonizing unrealized possibilities of choice. It is this despair in the face of possibility that links Pinkie most closely to A, that implicates him as a character enmeshed in the snares of aesthetic inwardness.[57]

Ida, by contrast, recognizes no such crisis for herself, and remains anaesthetized by her sensuous immediacy.[58] At the level of form, Greene enacts the struggle between despair and complacency by juxtaposing Ida's progress in her investigation of externals (proving Pinkie's guilt) with Pinkie's gradually more frantic internal state, forming each into a different narrative shape. While Ida's investigation undergoes the rational progression of realism, Pinkie's internal battles emerge as a series of crisis moments, dilated "instants" where he can always choose the good, but never does. But Greene adds a narrative twist through the shape of these competing plots. While Pinkie's internal struggle moves forward at breakneck speed, propelled by his inner

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[56] Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 252.

[57] At one point in *Either/Or*, A compares himself to a spider plunging into the open air: "When a spider hurls itself down from some fixed point, consistently with its nature, it always sees before it only an empty space wherein it can find no foothold however much it sprawls. And so it is with me: always before me an empty space; what drives me forward is a consistency which lies behind me. This life is topsy-turvy and terrible, not to be endured" (19). This is an especially apt description of Pinkie's sense of claustrophobia: pressed forward by what lies behind him, he can see no possibility of escape: only dark, empty space.

[58] For a reading of the difference between Pinkie and Ida that, while very different in its implications, runs parallel to my own, see Trevor L. Williams, "History over Theology: The Case for Pinkie in Greene's *Brighton Rock*," *Studies in the Novel* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 75. As Williams' title suggests, he is invested in a Marxist reading of the book that criticizes Ida's political complacency, but he provides this at the expense of any religious dimension, which he dismisses as outdated.

turmoil, Ida's investigation lacks form. She spends her days "entertaining" various random men, drinking in pubs, and stumbles on most of her important clues by chance, overhearing snippets of conversation or bumping into key witnesses. After she has saved Rose's life and ended Pinkie's by alerting the police, Ida returns to her normal life, apparently unchanged. In her last chapter she consults a Ouija board about her ex-husband, an appropriate analog to her treatment of the investigation. The afterlife, like a murder case, matters to her only as an item of entertainment, to be woven into the fabric of daily life without disturbing the other threads. Because of the lackadaisical narrative approach to Ida's investigations, the reader's attention gets diverted constantly away from the book's genre elements, the external mystery, and toward the more narratively gripping inner struggles of the murderer. In the end *Brighton Rock* suggests that Hale's murder matters less as a procedural matter, a whodunit, than as a stage for the individual's struggle to realize ethical choice, a howdoit.[59]

If the bulk of the book's narrative presents two unsavory options for approaching life, and refuses to choose between them, the final chapter sneakily undercuts this unresolved dialectic by providing a third option, a Kierkegaardian embrace of religious absurdity embodied in Rose's continued belief in Pinkie's love.[60] Meeting with a priest following Pinkie's death, Rose seeks not absolution – she refuses to ask forgiveness for her sins, preferring to join Pinkie in damnation – but guidance. Her priest presents to her the case of the French poet Charles

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[59] In a 1949 interview, Greene asserts that the modern interest in detective type stories (he prefers the term thrillers) lies not in "Who the criminal is, but rather to what state of abandon a man hunted down for a crime can be reduced" (*Conversations with Graham Greene*, 25).

[60] A, bemoaning his empty existence, wonders if anything might pull him out of despair: "Is there anything that could divert me? Aye, if I might behold a constancy that could withstand every trial, an enthusiasm that endured everything, a faith that could remove mountains, a thought that could unite the finite and the infinite. But my soul's poisonous doubt is all-consuming. My soul is like the dead sea, over which no bird can fly; when it has flown midway then it sinks down to death and destruction" (*Either/Or*, 30). Pinkie experiences a similar reaction to Rose throughout the book, a combination of fascination at and desire of her faith in him, and a repulsion at her simplicity driven by his own "poisonous doubt".

Péguy, who refused the sacraments but was considered by some a saint, since he wished to suffer for the sins of others; the priest then admonishes her to remember that she cannot comprehend the "Appalling… strangeness of the mercy of God."[61] Rose, maintaining hope for Pinkie's eternal soul even after his death in a state of mortal sin, goes home to listen to his voice on a phonograph record, believing Pinkie to have testified to his love for her with a tender message. The reader, however, knows that earlier in the novel, when Rose asks Pinkie to make this recording, he instead records himself cursing her and denying his love; she walks home, then, to (according to the novel's closing line) "The greatest horror of all."[62]

Rose, however, embraces the absurd, both in her devoted love to a man who clearly despises her, and her cherished hope that Pinkie might be saved from damnation, even beyond the grave. Recognition of this embrace gives a radically different meaning to the book's ending, which it is tempting to dismiss as one last cruel joke of fate. A surface reading of this ending assumes that Rose will hear the recording and be crushed, but given her response throughout the novel to Pinkie's abuse, it makes more sense to believe that her faith in Pinkie will continue even after she hears the message – she is able to make the leap of faith necessary to maintain equilibrium, even in the face of great horror.[63] The choice to end here shows *Brighton Rock's* subtle narrative structure, which weaves back and forth between Pinkie's despair and Ida's complacency, only to dismiss them both with a brief but powerful coda. Like the closing sermon of *Either/Or*, which cuts through the bluster of A's aesthetic indifference as well as the pomp of B's ethical musings, Rose's resolution of the dialectic is no Hegelian synthesis, no adopting of a

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[61] Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 268.
[62] Ibid, 269.
[63] Elliot Malamet gets close to deciphering Rose as a character when he assesses her paradoxical existence as someone both stupid and strangely cunning, a combination Pinkie finds impossible to pin down ("Graham Greene and the Hounds of *Brighton Rock*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 37, no. 4 [Winter 1991]: 695.)

middle ground; neither is it the modernist dissolve into irresolution. Rather, she continues to make the jump into the absurd within herself, remaining a cipher to those around her, but an exemplar to those who can detect her leaps of faith. The subtlety of this depiction places the onus of interpretation on the reader, who must embrace the absurd just as Rose does, trusting in the inner faith of the character instead of the external signs that point toward despair.

## Elements of Conversion: *Eyeless in Gaza*

> *As for the relationship of the subject to the truth when he comes to know it, the assumption is that if only the truth is brought to light, its appropriation is a relatively unimportant matter, something which follows as a matter of course. And in any case, what happens to the individual is in the last analysis a matter of indifference. Herein lies the lofty equanimity of the scholar, and the comic thoughtlessness of his parrot-like echo*
> – Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*[64]

If *Brighton Rock* illustrates the difficulty of escaping Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, especially in the context of an anxious modernity, then Huxley's pre-war novel *Eyeless in Gaza* offers a hope that the leap to the ethical remains possible.[65] Given Huxley's newfound interest in moral development in the wake of his discovery of Kierkegaard and embrace of pacifism, it's unsurprising that *Eyeless in Gaza* belongs, broadly speaking, to the category of the *bildungsroman*. Anthony Beavis, protagonist of *Eyeless in Gaza*, undergoes maturation, moving from aesthetic existence into the realm of the ethical. This process, however, does not progress naturally along with age or seem inevitable given Anthony's circumstances. He must make a willed choice to embrace change and does so only after undergoing personal crises. Even as

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[64] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 24.

[65] Unlike with Greene, it is relatively easy to trace Kierkegaard's influence on Huxley in the 1930s. In a February 1932 letter to Edward Sackville-West, a few months after having finished *Brave New World*, and around the time he began work on *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley reports having read selections from *Either/Or* in both German and French. He refers to the book as a "huge novel," a miscategorization that both demonstrates the difficulty in classifying this genre-bending book, and bears witness to the specific literary interest the book held for Huxley (*Letters*, 356). Huxley would go on to include quotes from Kierkegaard in several of his nonfiction books of the period. Most critically, though, Huxley's pejorative use of the term "aesthetic," and his explicit contrasting of the category with the "ethical," shows him clearly indebted to Kierkegaard's categories in this regard.

Huxley continues the modernist experimentation with the form of the *bildungsroman*, he pushes his book away from the modernist preoccupation with the aesthetic, as seen in the most famous modernist *bildungsroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.[66] As he does so, he also breaks with the form of his earlier novels. *Point Counter Point*, the summative novel of Huxley's early career, employs a dialog-driven dialectic that presents the radically different views of life held by its large cast of characters, most of whom have been held to be modeled on real life correspondents. Huxley's own fictional counterpart, the novelist Philip Quarles, espouses a cynical view of human nature as he toils away at his latest novel of ideas. Yet not even Quarles has the final word; the book's various voices struggle against each other without reaching resolution, creating for the reader a sense of the irreducible polyphony of modern ideas.[67] As Daniel Aureliano Newman has shown, however, *Point Counter Point's* polyphony gives way, in *Eyeless in Gaza*, to anachrony as the guiding formal principle.[68] Here past and present converge to present a summative view of human character as it writhes toward development. The child, for Huxley, is not so much the father of the man as the raw material out of which he must carve

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[66] For a consideration of the modernist *bildungsroman*, see Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006). Castle's assessment of Joyce and Woolf – that they stretch the bounds of the traditional *bildungsroman* through high modernist technical innovation, and emphasize the aesthetic aspects of development, to the point of diminishing the subject and personal development – is especially relevant given Huxley's critique of modernism's ethical and aesthetic thinness (29). Scholars have noted that *Either/Or* itself began life as a *bildungsroman* and retained many elements of that genre in its final form. See George Pattison, "Bonfire of the Genres: Kierkegaard's Literary Kaleidoscope," in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 46-7; and Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 273-5.

[67] See Jerome Meckier, "Aldous Huxley and the Congenital Novelists: New Ideas about the Novel of Ideas," *Southern Review* 13, no. 3 (1980): 204-214.

[68] "'Education of an Amphibian': Anachrony, Neotony, and Bildung in Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 62, no. 4 (December 2016): 403. Newman pairs Aldous' narrative strategies here with Julian Huxley's experiments with thyroid supplements and induced evolution in salamander, sensing a powerful parallel between induced evolution and Huxley's sense of self-development. Without diving too far into the biological details of Newman's argument, it's worth noting that his reading of Huxley's narrative strategy, like mine, senses a preference for suddenness over gradualism. Pierre Vitoux also reads *Eyeless in Gaza* in terms of crisis ("Structure and Meaning in Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 2 (1972): 213.

himself.[69] And while the polyphony of *Point Counter Point* allows the cynic to evade ethical responsibility by pointing to the irresolvable ambiguities of modern thought, *Eyeless in Gaza's* turn to anachrony forces both its protagonist and its reader to confront the ethical mistakes in their past in order to leap into a more ethical future.

At the same time, under the influence of Kierkegaard, Huxley works to cover his own tracks, not allowing a straightforward, didactic interpretation of the book. Jerry Wasserman has made a convincing case for *Either/Or's* direct influence on *Eyeless in Gaza*. He presents as evidence links between the two texts, noting that the protagonist's name, Anthony Beavis, gets shortened throughout the text to A.B. (the two fictional authors of *Either/Or*); that Anthony's diary begins one century to the day after the "Diary of the Seducer" in *Either/Or*; and that the chapters of *Eyeless in Gaza*, ordered as if shuffled out from a pack of cards, resemble in this the papers of A, which Victor Eremita claims he has let chance determine the order of.[70] What is most interesting in Wassmeran's argument is not the particular details, but his claim that this link should reorient the critical view towards Huxley's presentation of his pacifist views in the text. In Wasserman's account, Huxley works to ironize his own sincere beliefs, presenting them indirectly, not propagandistically, and leaving them in tension with Anthony's previously held

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[69] Victor Eremita, the fictional persona who edits *Either/Or*, suggests that A and B might in fact be the same person: "During my constant occupation with the papers, it dawned on me that they might be looked at from a new point of view, by considering all of them as the work of one man… I have not yet been able to relinquish the idea. Let us imagine a man who had lived through both of these phases, or who had thought upon both. A's papers contain a number of attempts to formulate an aesthetic philosophy of life. A single, coherent, aesthetic view of life can scarcely be carried out. B's papers contain an ethical view of life" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 11). Eremita goes on to stress that the book itself features no ending or resolution, a hint that the struggle to choose the ethical continues for a lifetime. Though both of Huxley's novels end with a "conversion" of sorts to the ethical, they also share this same sense that the ethical must be re-chosen in every moment.

[70] Jerry Wasserman, "Huxley's Either/Or: The Case for *Eyeless in Gaza*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 196-7. I would add that the character of Gerry, the aristocratic scoundrel who cheats Mary Amberley out of her money and seduces her daughter, Helen, seems clearly modeled on the figure of Johannes the Seducer from *Either/Or*. Though of course no explicit mention of Johannes is made in the text, Gerry's methods of seduction and abandonment, his quest to stave off boredom, even his preference for the young, naïve Helen, echo the preferences expressed by Johannes in "Diary of a Seducer."

aesthetic views of life.[71] Wasserman overstates his case somewhat, but he is right to resist the critical consensus that sees in Dr. Miller, the sage of *Eyeless in Gaza*, a magic wand that resolves Anthony's issues through the power of pacifist thinking, and in the novel more generally a direct prescription to be swallowed whole.[72] Though the book undeniably has an interest in the intellectual attractions of pacifism, its primary interest in conversion is a phenomenological one: it seeks to capture the difficulty of achieving sufficient willpower to change one's life, and the pain involved when one finally does take a leap into the ethical.

Anthony Beavis is trapped in the despair of the aesthetic stage. This might come as news to him at the beginning of *Eyeless in Gaza*: in 1933, he finds himself content with his apparent freedom in middle age, at work on a large tome titled *Elements of Sociology*, enjoying the benefits of a prolonged affair with the wife of a friend without any of the entanglements of marriage. Yet the memories of Anthony's past, which creep up on him with increasing frequency, tell a different story. In the major relationships of his life, he has failed through a lack of active will. Essentially passive, he lets life develop around him but always holds himself at arm's length, much like A in *Either/Or*. This passivity leads to his gradual isolation from his equally passive father following the death of Anthony's mother; it also causes Anthony the young man to betray his best friend, Brian, and compound that betrayal by not having the courage to admit his wrongdoing to Brian. Even Anthony circa 1933 remains dominated by passivity, unable to offer his lover Helen the commitment and support she craves. Like A, Anthony lives a life of indifference, refusing to make choices that might alter his even-keeled

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[71] Wasserman, "Huxley's Either/Or," 199-200.
[72] Even an ardent defender of *Eyeless in Gaza* like George Woodcock, who considers it Huxley's best novel, thinks that this excellence "Must be regarded as accidental, for his prime intention was to tell the tale of a conversion in a way that would leave no doubt of its implications in terms of… Right Actions proceeding from Right Understanding" (*Dawn and the Darkest Hour* [New York: Viking, 1972], 19).

existence.[73] Singling out a defect for correction in his post-conversion diary, Anthony chooses indifference: "That which besets me is indifference. I can't be bothered about people. Or rather, won't. For I avoid, carefully, all occasions for being bothered."[74] At a point later in the plot (though earlier in the story), the narrator compares college-aged Anthony to a fish in an aquarium, distant and alienated from real life.[75] Anthony seeks to reverse E.M. Forster's plea: only disconnect. This indifference links him directly to A from *Either/Or*, who advises against both friendship and marriage. Tellingly, A connects the ability to regulate relationships before they reach the stage of intimacy to the ability to remember and forget at will.[76] For Anthony too this dual act of remembering and forgetting – of being able to regulate the flow of one's memory – helps him stay anchored in indifference. His ability to block out the past, especially his moral responsibility regarding Brian's suicide, helps maintain his illusion of absolute freedom.[77]

The narrative structure of *Eyeless in Gaza*, long a source of confusion for critics, comes into focus when considered as a Kierkegaardian parody of modernist jumbling and a subtle rebuke of the aesthetic understanding of life in favor of the ethical.[78] Though each storyline

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[73] The fullest explication of the Aesthete's indifference comes in the Diapsalmata section of *Either/Or*, which collects his sundry thoughts on a wide range of topics. Melancholy and indifference form a unifying thread through this section. For representative examples, see Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 15, 18-19, 22, 29.

[74] Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), 14.

[75] "Everything was supernaturally brilliant and distinct, but at the same time how remote, how strangely irrelevant! Bright against the outer twilight of the room, the faces grouped about the table might have been things seen on the other side of a sheet of plate-glass, in an illuminated aquarium. And the aquarium was not only without, it was also, mysteriously, within him. Looking through the glass at those sea flowers and submarine gems, he was himself a fish… His divine fish-soul hung there, poised in its alien element, gazing, gazing through huge eyes that perceived everything, understood everything, but having no part in what he saw" (Ibid, 133).

[76] "The art of remembering and forgetting will also insure against sticking fast in some relationship of life, and make possible the realization of a complete freedom" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 242).

[77] "He had made his decision – or rather, as he preferred to put it when, later on, in the privacy of his bedroom, he thought of the events of the evening, the decision had made itself. Looking back, he felt that he had had nothing to do with the matter" (Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*, 511). Anthony's memory once more opts for passivity over ethical choice. Here it seems worth mentioning that the Kierkegaard quote Huxley includes in his 1933 nonfiction work *Texts and Pretexts*, from the book *Repetition*, deals directly with memory and action: ""Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards,'" (*Texts and Pretexts* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933], 159).

[78] Harold Watts believed that the chapters could be rearranged in chronological order without losing any of the "essential meaning" (Quoted in Peter Firchow, *Aldous Huxley: Satirist and Novelist* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972], 147). Though David Garnett, in his initial review of *Eyeless in Gaza*, referred to it as

progresses linearly on its own, the seemingly random distribution of chapters jostles the different eras of Anthony's life against each other. Despite 1933 Anthony's insistence that his memories come at random, shuffled out like playing cards by the lunatic dealer of the subconscious,[79] a close examination of the juxtaposition of the book's 52 chapters reveals clusters of crises, where Anthony's life across various periods aligns, allowing the reader to examine his move from the aesthetic to the ethical. These clusters constitute a major resistance to the paratactic approach taken by many modernist novels, and invite the reader to interpret Anthony's actions against the grain of his own preferred interpretation.[80] Though Anthony, trapped in the aesthetic, regards the items of his past like a modernist would – a random jumble void of significance – the novel brings these disparate items together in such a way as to illuminate the underlying unity of Anthony's life.[81] Here Huxley pushes back against Woolf's assertion of life as a luminous halo; while neither is life a series of symmetrically arranged parts, a pattern does emerge, one that spells out either ethical refusal or ethical choice. Unlike the memories of Clarissa Dalloway, which do float in and out of *Mrs. Dalloway* mysteriously, the fragments of Anthony Beavis' past enter *Eyeless in Gaza* in such a way as to teach the reader how to interpret his life: as one where ethics has been avoided, but can still be chosen.

By bringing together crisis points from various times in Anthony's life, Huxley creates a more complex dilation of Kierkegaard's "instant" than Pinkie's slow-motion choices in *Brighton*

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Huxley's finest novel, he also noted that "On the whole the plan of popping about in time is a mistake. If the chronological method had been followed, I should have stopped reading at page 500 and have missed almost all the boring parts of the book" (*Aldous Huxley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Donald Watt [London: Routledge, 1975]: 251). The boring parts are, of course, the elements of Beavis' post-conversion life. Q.D. Leavis calls the time shifts arbitrary and says they work only to confuse the reader (Ibid, 253).

[79] Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*, 23.

[80] For the relation between parataxis and the modernist sense of the self as fragmented, see Dennis Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 107.

[81] In this period Huxley frequently parodies modernist parataxis by taking it to extremes, such as the scene that survey's the college-age Anthony's hodgepodge collection of books, ranging from Remy de Gourmont to Theresa of Avila (*Eyeless in Gaza*, 115-6).

*Rock*. Past (Anthony as a boy and young man), present (the Anthony of 1933, poised on the edge of the ethical), and future (Anthony after his leap into the ethical, working as a pacifist speech writer) converge to break down for the reader the movement of the leap, a progression from indifference to anxious crisis to ethical choice. The first major crisis cluster has its nexus in Chapter XII, where a dog falls from an airplane, splattering Anthony and his lover Helen with its guts as they lie in post-coital bliss on Anthony's roof. In the book's overall plot, this downward falling dog marks a turning point, since Anthony's indifferent reaction prompts Helen to leave him, resulting in Anthony's initial crisis, which compels him to confront his own indifference. The chapter immediately before the dog falls, Chapter XI, details Anthony's work, seven years earlier, on the *Elements of Sociology*, his major pre-conversion work, a book that reveals Anthony's commitment to indifference and passivity.[82] Chapter XIII, immediately post-dog, comprises a selection from Anthony's diary that records the beginning of his new occupation as a pacifist speech-maker. Events from three distinct points – 1926, 1933, and 1934 – converge to reveal the vast difference between Anthony the aesthete, bound by indifference, and Anthony the ethical thinker, committed to moral choice. Narratively, his change of writing hinges on the crisis occasioned by the dog, though of course temporally the three chapters are separated by a space of many years.

The second major cluster, which propels Anthony from the edge of the ethical into the ethical realm proper, occurs from Chapters XLVI through LII, which toggle back and forth between Brian's suicide and Anthony's conversion. In fact, Brian's discovery of Anthony's deception and his running away in Chapter XLVIII get sandwiched between an account of the

[82] "Only the rather stupid and insentient, nowadays, have strong and sharply defined personalities. Only the barbarians among us 'know what they are.' The civilized are conscious of 'what they may be,' and so are incapable of knowing what, for practical, social purposes, they actually are – have forgotten how to select a personality out of their total atomic experience" (Ibid, 149).

gruesome injury of Anthony's friend Mark in Mexico, and Anthony's first meeting with Dr. Miller – two temporally connected events, as it is on the way to get help for Mark that Anthony stumbles across Miller. Huxley juxtaposes Anthony's greatest ethical failure – his inability to be honest with and help Brian – with his encounter with the man who will catalyze his eventual leap into the ethical, creating the sharpest contrast in the book between the sensuous immediacy of the aesthetic and the selfless duty of the ethical. Immediately before these conjoined narrative crises, the book gives another excerpt from Anthony's diary of 1934, in which he meditates on the potential usefulness of literature, but finds contemporary literature lacking in its ability to portray real life – digestion, random events, and all. What is needed, Anthony thinks, is "a form that would have power to bring the facts home to the whole mind, not merely to the intellect."[83] In both clusters of narrative crisis, then, Huxley connects Anthony's personal struggles with the struggle to create meaningful literature, and attempts to bring home the facts of Anthony's leap at the level of form, not merely content.

But he also hints at the broader social struggle to achieve an ideal form for communal life, a theme underlined by the shadow of war subtly hanging over the book. It is no coincidence that Brian's suicide takes place in late July 1914, mere days before the outbreak of the Great War, or that Mark goes to Mexico to start a revolution. Even the dead dog on the rooftop gestures toward war; dropped out of an airplane, it is a gruesome reminder of the cruelties of aerial bombardment. *Eyeless in Gaza*, then, creates what Favret, following Raymond Williams, describes as a structure of the feeling of perpetual wartime;[84] Anthony's personal struggles form a microcosm of societal discord. Yet Anthony's case shows the way out, an escape route Huxley,

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[83] Ibid, 522.
[84] Favret, *War at a Distance*, 10.

through subtle positioning, extends to society as a whole. The moment of crisis faced by Western Europe in the buildup to World War II provides the European nations themselves the opportunity to move from "aesthetic" sensuous immediacy – the short term political planning that considers only immediate gain – toward the ethical behavior of nations that consider the big picture and work toward international cooperation and peace. Huxley does not explicitly state this connection, instead letting the dialectic narrative structure of *Eyeless in Gaza* suggest it indirectly to the reader. Even if the critics are correct, then, and the didactic elements of *Eyeless in Gaza* come on too strong, the real force behind Huxley's arguments for the ethical lies in the form of the book itself. Its indirect, anachronous structure acts obliquely, forcing the reader to confront the incompatibility of the aesthetic and the ethical, and perhaps, like Anthony, make a reckoning with his or her own past, and leap into an ethical future.

## War Immanent: Huxley and Greene's Fiction of World War II

> *One man alone cannot help or save the age in which he lives, he can only express the fact that it will perish* – 1849 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[85]

If *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Brighton Rock* succeed in conveying the feeling of crisis building to a fever pitch in the years before 1939, Huxley's and Greene's later novels show the change of feeling that occurs in the shift from war imminent to war immanent. While war remains something avoidable, if just barely, in *Eyeless in Gaza*, and something operating only on the personal level in *Brighton Rock*, war becomes inescapable in Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop* and Greene's *The End of the Affair*, written at the end of the war and in the years just after, respectively. Unlike the transformations noted by MacKay among later modernist writers, however, the shifts in Huxley and Greene feel more fully connected to their pre-war work, less a

[85] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 299.

change in kind than in degree. Huxley's pacifism remains unchallenged in the face of Nazi horrors – he still believes that war must be avoided. But the onset of actual war drains him of some of the optimism found in *Eyeless in Gaza*, with the result that the actions available to the ethical actor narrow in scope. Huxley had challenged the vigorous pro-Republican stance of the Auden circle during the Spanish Civil War in a pamphlet entitled *What Are You Going to Do About It?*, a provocation to which the communist poet C. Day Lewis responded in his own pamphlet *We're Not Going to Do Nothing*.[86] Huxley fights back against this implied charge of inaction in his fiction, but while in *Eyeless* he answers his own question of what's to be done with an affirmation of the value of pacifist speechmaking, the answer he gives in *Time Must Have a Stop* is more modest: in the face of great evil, the ethical person suffers alongside those who suffer.

Greene, meanwhile, while he supports the British war effort, reinterprets the meaning of wartime crisis in *The End of the Affair*. Rather than the full out resistance of Huxley, or the reluctant compromise of Woolf, Greene embraces wartime conditions not from an outsized sense of nationalism, but for the heightening sense of crisis they bestow on the individual, and the stripping away of society's detritus, what he calls in an essay on the Blitz the "old dog-toothed civilization" breaking up like a cracked cup put in boiling water.[87] The physical ruins of bombed cities play a large part in Greene's war output, from the burned over remains of Vienna in the film *The Third Man* to London's Blitz-wearied buildings in *The End of the Affair*, but these physical tokens point to the underlying spiritual reality of a culture done in by its own failures. The Blitz, for Greene, brings the crisis rhythm that should pulse through the lives of all people

[86] For correspondence between Huxley and Lewis on this issue, see Huxley, *Letters*, 411.
[87] Qtd. in Bernard Bergonzi, *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and Its Background 1939-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

inescapably to the forefront, creating moments of catastrophe that create the conditions necessary for individuals to leap between the stages of life. Nowhere is this confluence of wartime feeling and Kierkegaardian crisis narrative more evident than in *The End of the Affair*, Greene's most narratively complex exploration of the individual's choice of faith.

While the actual experience of war shifts the Kierkegaardian elements of their novels, Greene and Huxley remain indebted to the stages of life as a narrative tool for exploring character development. Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop* offers an even clearer division between the aesthetic and the ethical than *Eyeless in Gaza*, creating characters who embody both stages, while still retaining their individuality. Even though the ethical stage in *Time Must Have a Stop* consists in suffering, rather than speech making, the suffering ethical agent still possesses more active choice than the person cocooned in aesthetic indifference. Huxley's vision of the ethical in *Time Must Have a Stop* brings him closer to a Kierkegaardian embrace of the absurd: the ethical is worth choosing even though it cannot halt the forces of evil in the world. Greene pushes this notion of the absurd even farther in *The End of the Affair*. Whereas Huxley's main interaction with Kierkegaard came through *Either/Or*, with its emphasis on the aesthetic and ethical stages, and *Brighton Rock*'s illustration of the aesthetic life lines up best with that book as well, *The End of the Affair* owes an explicit debt to *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard moves beyond the ethical stage into the religious. Greene's vision of a leap into the religious absurd, activated by the pressures of war immanent, provides the clearest fictional illustration of Kierkegaard's appeal to a British people embroiled in continual crisis. Critically, both *Time Must Have a Stop* and *The End of the Affair* retain the narrative ambiguity of the earlier novels, an ambiguity designed to prompt in the reader an active response of ethical or religious interpretation.

## Suffering as Ethics: *Time Must Have a Stop*

> *Christian suffering is really neither more nor less than the suffering of responsibility, that and that alone; for outwardly one is victorious even though one is spat upon* – 1848 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[88]

*Time Must Have a Stop* achieves a refinement of the anachronous, Kierkegaardian dialectic technique explored by Huxley in *Eyeless in Gaza*, in the process providing an even clearer instantiation of crisis-driven progression from the aesthetic to the ethical stage. Even at the time of the writing of *Eyeless in Gaza*, Huxley seemed aware of its imperfections as a novel, a testament to the difficulty he experienced in writing it.[89] *Time Must Have a Stop* rewrites the earlier novel's theme of movement from the aesthetic to the ethical around a tighter story and more fully drawn characters, resulting in a novel that Huxley himself considered his finest balance between ideas and form.[90]

Huxley simplifies the technique of the jarring jump in time, reducing the constant chronological shuffling of *Eyeless in Gaza* down to a single large gap between the book's main body and the lengthy epilog. This creates a juxtaposition in time more accessible to readers, many of whom had puzzled over the seemingly random order of chapters in *Eyeless in Gaza*. Simultaneously, Huxley creates characters who, while still embodying varying approaches to life, feel more fully drawn, especially in the case of the book's main interlocutors: Eustace Barnack, uncle of protagonist Sebastian and representative of the aesthetic life, and Bruno

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[88] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 276.

[89] In November of 1932, writing to Eugene F. Saxton, Huxley mentions working on a new novel, and hopes that "If it does start flowing, it might well be finished by the end of next summer" (*Letters*, 366). Still at work in January 1935, he admits to Mrs. Kevethan Roberts of "Chronic trouble with my book" (390). Having finally finished it in 1936, he responds gratefully to C.E.M. Joad's reassurance, having seen the book in proofs, that it is worthwhile: "I'm very glad to know that you think the book's all right. I had lost all sense of what it was like – wd have liked, if it had been possible, to put it aside and look at it again after two or three years. Wolves at door imposed immediate publication and I let it go, feeling uncomfortably in the dark about [the] thing" (404).

[90] See Charles M. Holmes, *Aldous Huxley and the Way to Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 133.

Rontini, Sebastian's Italian cousin who advocates for ethical existence. Eustace is an especially good creation, a Falstaffian figure who, unlike the selfish Anthony or cruel Gerry from *Eyeless in Gaza*, makes clear the appeal of the aesthetic life.[91] Bruno too, though not quite so well drawn, stands out from his analog in *Eyeless in Gaza*, Dr. Miller, largely because the reader sees him practice his ideals, rather than just preach them, as he suffers at the hands of Mussolini.[92] As Sebastian remarks at the novel's end, "Bruno could somehow convince you that it all made sense. Not by talking, of course; by just being."[93] Huxley swaps Miller's speechifying for Bruno's embodied ethical living, an echoing of Kierkegaard's preference for creating characters who incarnate the stages of life, rather than writing essayistic analyses of each stage. *Time Must Have a Stop* thus corrects *Eyeless in Gaza's* occasional drift into lopsidedness by investing more fully in its characters, developing a fruitful tension between the aesthetic and the ethical that clarifies the difficulties involved in moving from one stage to the other.

Only seventeen during the main portion of the novel, Sebastian faces the typical aesthetic temptations of the adolescent: sex, vanity, and the lures of an idle existence, all of which his uncle Eustace embodies to the impressionable Sebastian.[94] Against these temptations stands Bruno, who urges on Sebastian a reflectiveness that leads to self-improvement and, eventually, to reforming the world for the better. Eustace's battle with Bruno over Sebastian's future comprises the main internal struggle of the book's narrative, a neat trick given that Eustace dies of a heart

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[91] Drawing on Huxley's fascination with physiological types, Milton Birnbaum calls Eustace "The best-drawn portrait of the viscerotonic type," or epicurean enjoyer of sensual pleasures (*Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values* [Knoxvilled: University of Tennessee Press, 1971], 50).

[92] Peter Firchow notes that Huxley left out of the final manuscript a chapter where Bruno lectures Sebastian in a more didactic mode, suggesting that Huxley deliberately toned down the figure of Bruno in comparison to Miller or Propter (*Aldous Huxley: Satirist and Novelist*, 165).

[93] Aldous Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop* (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 262.

[94] Here Huxley cannot resist a jab at Nietzsche, connecting Sebastian's immature cynicism to the German philosopher: "Last Christmas [Sebastian] had read Nietzsche, and since then he had known that he must Love his Fate. *Amor fati* – but tempered with a healthy cynicism" (*Time Must Have a Stop*, 2).

attack halfway through, and Bruno spends relatively little time in the actual narrative, existing more as a figure spoken of than to. Huxley plays this struggle out at the level of narrative structure: for most of the novel, a picaresque mode dominates, and Sebastian's life of aesthetic inwardness unfolds in a series of vignettes that connect only loosely. This is life viewed by the aesthete, random occurrences devoid of ethical significance. *Time Must Have a Stop*'s final third, however, rebukes such fluidity, cutting back and forth between the disastrous consequences of Sebastian's moral cowardice and Eustace's own struggle, in the afterlife, to leap from the aesthetic to the ethical, before jumping ahead, in the epilogue, to a Sebastian finally able to live an ethical life. Life viewed from the ethical stage assumes a coherence beneath its scattered surface: each choice, ethical or unethical, ripples outward in its effects.

At novel's end Huxley narrows in on the reverberations of Sebastian's choices, both within his own life and outward. This narrative preoccupation with responsibility mimics Bruno's advice that Sebastian draw up a genealogy of his misdeeds, tracing them backward to their origins and forward to their possible consequences.[95] Hence the purpose of the epilog, which seemingly has little to do with the plot of the rest of the novel but brings full circle Sebastian's youthful misdeeds. Viewed from the ethical stage, Sebastian's life has a unity to it, one that speaks to the destructiveness of aesthetic living, harmless as it might appear in the moment. Sebastian's small selfish choices – his inability to tell the truth, his continued affair with the seductive but cynical Veronica Thwale – have not merely hurt himself, dulling him to the call of the ethical. These choices have also widened out and hurt those around him (Sebastian's lies lead to Bruno's arrest, while his affair with Thwale contributes to the death of

[95] George Pattison argues something similar regarding Kierkegaard's view of self-development, that it requires knowledge of one's past and the possibilities of one's future. He also sees this viewpoint demonstrated in the ethical writings of Judge Wilhelm in Part II of *Either/Or* (*Kierkegaard & the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, 171).

his wife). The jump in time reveals the false promise of the aesthetic – that selfish actions have no lasting consequences – by revealing Sebastian's continued enmeshment in the unethical choices of his past. Just as small unethical acts might have big consequences, however, the reverse holds true: Sebastian's modest attempts at ethical living in the epilog, though they seem dwarfed by the huge atrocities of war, have the potential to positively impact the world.

If *Time Must Have a Stop*'s epilog compresses time in order to demonstrate the unity of life as revealed by ethical judgement, Eustace Barnack's struggle to attain the ethical even after death dilates time, each instant comprising an eternity, in order to show the soul's struggle to leap between stages. As he floats through his Bardo-like existence, Eustace constantly faces the choice to join the universal consciousness, but resists because to do so would require giving up the memories of his sensuous past.[96] Even within his atemporal existence, Eustace experiences these moments of choice as Kierkegaardian instants, intersections of time and eternity, where the possibility of the ethical stretches out limitlessly before him: "For an instant, for an eternity, there was a total and absolute participation. Then, excruciatingly, the knowledge of being separate resumed, the shamed perception of his own hideous and obscene opacity".[97] The chapters that follow Eustace through the afterlife once more parody modernism, presenting his disjointed thoughts through an especially incoherent instance of stream of consciousness narration. Only when Eustance experiences these "instants" does the stream of his consciousness ebb, leaving the reader to examine with clarity Eustace's inability to leap into the ethical.

As with Sebastian's life, the book's treatment of the journey of Eustace's soul widens out to examine the effect of his ethical complacency on others. At certain points, Eustace gains a sort

[96] For this section's basis in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, see Holmes, *Aldous Huxley and the Way to Reality*, 133-138.
[97] Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, 223.

of clairvoyance, able to see proleptic flashes of future events, what the book describes as "remembering events that had not yet taken place".[98] The two primary, harrowing instances of this future memory involve Eustace gaining a glimpse of the atrocities of World War II, including the death of his other nephew, the dull Jim Poulshot, at the hands of Japanese soldiers, and the struggle of refugees to escape fascist violence. Eustace's spirit watches in horror as the Japanese soldiers drive their bayonets "In the face, in the belly, in the throat and the genitals [of Jim] – again and again, until the screaming stopped".[99] Despite Eustace's horror, this moment of crisis does not rouse his spirit out of the aesthetic sphere, as his laughter, symbol of indifference, battles back against his feelings of pity. Later, as Eustace gains a vision of a young boy mourning the death of his mother at the hands of the fascists, he enters even more fully into the pain of another person, but still finds himself unable to make the final leap into the universal ethical by choosing to suffer alongside the boy:

> The little boy crouched there, his face in his hands, his body trembling and shaken by sobs. And suddenly it was no longer from outside that he was thought about. The agony of that grief and terror were known directly, by an identifying experience of them – not as his, but mine. Eustace Barnack's awareness of the child had become one with the child's awareness of himself; it *was* that awareness… None of that, none of that. Firmly and with decision, he averted his attention"[100]

Contrast these proleptic, distanced descriptions of death and mourning with the "Time Passes" section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which Eustace's stream of consciousness calls to mind:

> [Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well.]… [A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.][101]

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[98] Ibid, 222. Huxley once more echoes language from *Either/Or*. In one of the last aphorisms of the Diapsalmata A compares his melancholy to a knight's castle, where he takes refuge: "I live as one dead. I immerse everything I have experienced in a baptism of forgetfulness unto an eternal remembrance. Everything finite and accidental is forgotten and erased… [he talks to a boy who] remembers everything before I tell it" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 34).
[99] Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, 197.
[100] Ibid, 224.
[101] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1981), 132-3.

Woolf's passage utilizes distance in its description of the deaths of the Ramsay children – notably the switch to omniscient narration and the closing off of the deaths through use of brackets – creating an aesthetically polished and affective representation of death and destruction. But there is no ethical charge to these descriptions; time simply passes and tragedy unfolds, inexorable in its advance. As Michael Levenson argues, "Time Passes" enlarges its background (the real world) to diminish the characters in the foreground; individual and world remain irreconcilable.[102] Hence the vagueness surrounding those who witness these events: "people said" Prue's death was a tragedy, and Andrew dies alongside "twenty or thirty young men." Huxley provides a similar sense of distance but focuses as much on Eustace's act of observation – and the ethical dilemma it calls forth – as on the death itself. If Woolf's distance suggests a helplessness in the face of inevitable death, Huxley counters that, even faced with death beyond our control, individuals still have the ability to act ethically, by not refusing their share of responsibility. Eustace does refuse, and remains trapped at novel's end in a sort of limbo, unwilling to embrace fully either darkness or light. Crisis cannot ensure ethical development – the most it can do is provide the conditions under which ethical choice becomes possible. By showing the deadening effects of selfish aestheticism, and the potential fruitfulness of even small ethical choices, Huxley encourages the reader to embrace the ethical life even when that life seems absurdly paltry when lived under the shadow of war.

Sebastian's growth between the end of the main part of the book and the epilog provides the positive example to balance out Eustace's inability to progress ethically. Because of

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[102] *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 170-1. Vincent Sherry, reading "Time Passes" in the context of the pressures of the Great War, sees the bracketing as a double move, "First, to conceal… ultimately to reveal their own concealments" about the inability of rational language to deal with the enormities of war (*The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, 295). Such a reading suggests that Woolf herself felt the inadequacy of pure aestheticism long before World War II, even if she relegated her doubts to brackets.

Sebastian's status as poet manqué, his growth also allows Huxley to tie Sebastian's ethical growth to his move from purely aesthetic writing to an ethically aware authorship. Bruno criticizes the young Sebastian for being enraptured by the aesthetics of poetry, to the neglect of his ethical development, and asserts that this has been the common downfall of most literary geniuses throughout history.[103] Sebastian proves this assessment by his immature actions, his inability to tell the truth leading indirectly to Bruno's arrest by Italian fascists. The adult Sebastian of the epilog, however, embraces the vocation of ethical author, producing a manifesto that urges ethical choice. Sebastian's mature thoughts on writing echo Kierkegaard's; truth cannot be directly communicated, only hinted at: "The best one could hope to do by means of words was to remind oneself of what one once had unitively understood and, in others, to evoke the wish and create some of the conditions for a similar understanding."[104] Like Kierkegaard, Sebastian believes that literature should catalyze real change in the individual, but can only do so indirectly.

Huxley builds this indirectness into the novel's structure. Little insight is given into Sebastian's own leap into the ethical, or into his life in general in the decade in between the novel's main plot and the epilog. The reader only gleans that Sebastian, who could not heed Bruno's advice as a teenager, became converted to the ethical life while taking care of a dying Bruno on his release from prison. The aesthetic and ethical stages in Sebastian's life emerge clearly – in the main plot and the epilog, respectively – but the leap between them remains occluded, compelling the reader to fill in the gaps in the story. By meditating on Sebastian's ethical leap, the reader might in turn make his or her own leap.

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[103] Huxley, *Time Must Have a Stop*, 211-2.
[104] Ibid, 254.

The wartime setting of the epilog punctures the false idyll of the main plot (already deflated by Eustace's proleptic visions of wartime brutality), raising the stakes of ethical choice for the individual. Though he cannot stop the war himself, Sebastian finds himself in a more hopeful position than others, including his father, a disappointed communist. His father might laugh at his hope that the gradual spread of ethical awareness will stop future wars, but Sebastian holds onto this "one in a million" chance because it offers the only sure ground for peace: "Peace can't exist except where there's a metaphysic, which all accept and a few actually succeed in realizing…By direct intuition… the way you realize the beauty of a poem."[105] Here the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political come together; ethical intuition completes aesthetic intuition, leading to positive political changes. Sebastian rejects the idea that the suffering of war automatically makes people better, but he does recognize that the pressures of war allow for a heightening of vision, a chance to see the dire consequences that follow the rejection of ethics. It is up to those who have glimpsed the ethical, Huxley suggests, to pass on their vision, in bits and pieces, to those around them.

### No Ending or Beginning: Kierkegaardian Dialectic in *The End of the Affair*

> *The whole development of the world tends to the importance of the individual; that, and nothing else, is the principle of Christianity… Christianity is certainly accessible to all but – be it carefully noted – only provided everyone becomes an individual, becomes 'the individual'. But people have neither the moral nor the religious courage. The majority is quite terrified of becoming each one of them, an individual* – 1847 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[106]

Like *Time Must Have a Stop*, Greene's *The End of the Affair* engages in a form of Kierkegaardian indirect communication, using its narrative incompleteness to prompt the reader

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[105] Ibid, 261.
[106] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 193.

to wrestle with the absurdities of religious belief. Terry Eagleton has noted the paradoxical nature of Graham Greene's protagonists, trapped between humanism and orthodox Catholicism, and sees in this paralysis a picture of the appeal of Catholicism by negative means – in rejecting the rules of Catholicism, Greene's protagonists reveal the strength of those rules.[107] Eagleton's point clarifies part of the reason Greene's protagonists tend toward a negative faith: in depicting the crisis of life, Greene recognizes that posing the problem is much easier than providing a solution; characters bewildered by crisis make for more interesting plots than those assuredly navigating it. Greene's subsequent biographical history as a wavering Catholic has made it harder to read the specific direction of his fiction from the Catholic period, assumptions about correlation between author and character clouding Greene's more complex narrative strategies. Careful attention to the actual texts – especially *The End of the Affair*, the final novel in the Catholic sequence– reveals Greene's concern with indirection, a narrative strategy – heavily theorized and practiced by Kierkegaard – by which the novels prompt a response from the reader without directly stating their point. This indirectness constitutes for Greene a main "technique for manoeuvring" the reader.[108] Greene, like Kierkegaard, finds it infinitely easier to show readers what to avoid than to communicate positive ethical or religious content directly. Greene's characters of actual religious belief – Rose in *Brighton Rock*, but even more so Sarah Miles in *The End of the Affair* – remain hidden, emerging only occasionally to provide glimpses of the absurd. Paradoxically, their absence becomes more compelling than their presence ever could be. Like the Abraham depicted by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, the religious essence of these characters cannot be grasped directly by the reader, but their very indecipherability gives

[107] "Reluctant Heroes: The Novels of Graham Greene," 98-100.
[108] Roston, *Graham Greene's Narrative Strategies*, 7. Anne T. Salvatore connects indirect communication in Greene's novels specifically to Kierkegaard (*The Discourse of Belief*, 19, 29).

them a charged attraction. This attraction prompts readers, as they attempt to fill in the gaps left by the novel's elliptical narration, to question whether or not they find themselves able to make their own leap of faith.

While *Brighton Rock* engages with popular culture, both in its form as a thriller and its thematic preoccupation with seaside carnivals and schlock films, *The End of the Affair* takes a turn toward the literary, providing as protagonist Maurice Bendrix, a writer of self-consciously literary fiction, and utilizing the most complex narrative structure of Greene's career. The anachronous presentation of plot, along with the interpolated text of Sarah's diary (and the metafictional element, since Bendrix writes the text of the book), seem out of place for a writer most known for his plain style and lack of ornamentation.[109] But the flurry of techniques serves a purpose in the book, as the realist Bendrix bumps up against paradoxes he cannot explain. His realist, materialist approach to life and writing fails to capture the complexities of the story he has to tell of his love affair with Sarah Miles, her mysterious breaking off of the affair, and her eventual death and possible sainthood. The miraculous, especially, finds itself fitting uncomfortably into Bendrix's account, as he can neither deny its occurrence nor find adequate explanation for it. Within Bendrix's book, words and narrative strategies constantly fail. He notes the arbitrariness of beginnings, endings, character development, and the sorting out of minor details from major developments.[110] Bendrix experiences so much difficulty because he sets out to capture the eternal moment – the instant – but cannot himself figure reality as anything but a collection of facts, a summative approach that precludes the eternal.[111] The

[109] Even Greene's friend and admirer Evelyn Waugh describes his writing as "Not a specifically literary style at all. The words are functional, devoid of sensuous attraction, of ancestry and independent life… The words are simply mathematical signs for his thought" ("Felix Culpa?," 97).
[110] Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 1, 121, 154-5, 17.
[111] He bemoans that, even in the act of love, he behaves like a policeman gathering evidence (Ibid, 40).

novel's structure implicitly rebukes this summative approach through its cyclical shape, presenting events multiple times to reveal the inner truth behind them. Through this the novel suggests that, as Victor Eremita puts in in the Preface to *Either/Or*, "The external is not the internal."[112] Just as the actions of Judas and Peter during the Passion might seem indistinguishable to the untrained eye,[113] the meeting point of the eternal and the temporal goes unnoticed by those wrapped up in the material world. It is in this rebuke of the summative approach that Greene distinguishes himself most clearly from both realism (where a collection of externals adds up to internal meaning) and modernism (where a collection of externals adds up to nothing coherent). In the hands of modernists encyclopedic form, as Paul K. Saint-Amour argues, resists totalizing statements about society,[114] but for Greene this resistance itself acts as an evasion of the unified spiritual truth beneath the cluttered material surface. By rejecting the summative approach, *The End of the Affair* teaches its reader how to interpret itself: the novel's events only resolve through the active participation of a reader willing to leap to faith in the book's characters.

Like Johannes de Silentio, the fictional author of *Fear and Trembling*, who finds himself undone by Abraham's example of faith, Bendrix reaches the limits of language in his encounter with Sarah's newfound belief. The phrases Bendrix uses to describe this experience are eerily similar to those employed by Silentio in Robert Payne's 1939 translation of *Fear and Trembling*. Noting that writing about unhappiness is much easier than writing about happiness, since unhappiness entail an individualized sensation of pain, Bendrix claims that "Happiness annihilates us: we lose our identity."[115] Compare this to Silentio as he mulls over Abraham and

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[112] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 4.
[113] Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 19.
[114] Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, 39-40.
[115] Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 36.

Hegel. Hegel, Silentio claims, he can understand easily, but "Whenever I try to think about Abraham, I am as it were annihilated."[116] Both authors occupy the uncertain space of unbelievers encountering powerful witnesses to faith's absurdity; Silentio repeatedly claims to be without faith, and while Bendrix moves from a complacent atheism to a grudging intellectual belief in God, it is belief stripped of the animating power of actual faith.[117] Bendrix moves by hatred, not love: his account begins as one of hatred toward Sarah and her easygoing, cuckolded husband Henry, but he eventually transfers this hatred toward God, for robbing him of Sarah's love. Yet he, like Silentio, finds himself drawn toward faith not so much by the notion of God, but by the strong witness of another person's leap.

It is in the book's conception of the leap that *The End of the Affair* most clearly reveals its debt to Kierkegaard. Sarah's embrace of faith hinges on a moment of crisis, one that prods her to take a leap in the dark. Sharing Bendrix's apartment during a Blitz bombing, Sarah discovers Bendrix, seemingly dead, under a pile of rubble. She prays to a God she does not believe in, promising that she will sacrifice her affair with Bendrix if he can be brought back to life. When he stirs, she begins a years-long, halting journey toward faith, one she only completes shortly before her death as she seeks entrance into the Catholic Church. Though the completion of her faith comes years after the initial promise, Sarah still considers, in retrospect, that moment of crisis to constitute a radical break in her life.[118] Bendrix himself views faith as a leap. Speaking

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[116] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 39.

[117] Anne T. Salvatore compares Bendrix to A the Aesthete from *Either/Or* – an apt comparison, especially since Bendrix shares many common attributes with the aesthetic characters of Huxley's books ("Socratic Midwifery," 28-9). I would argue, however, that Bendrix gradually transitions out of the aesthetic stage and reaches the borderlands between the ethical and the religious – unable, however, to make the final leap.

[118] In a letter to Bendrix just before her death, she seeks to explain why she broke off communication with him, and describes her faith in the following way: "I believe there's a God – I believe the whole bag of tricks, there's nothing I don't believe… I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love… I've never been sure before about anything. When you came in at the door with the blood on your face, I became sure. Once and for all. Even though I didn't know it at the time" (Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 121).

to the memory of Sarah after her death, Bendrix clings to his own bitterness as a defense against the pressure he feels to take his own leap in imitation of Sarah:

> For if this God exists, I thought, and if even you – with your lusts and your adulteries and the timid lies you used to tell – can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, but shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if *you* are a saint, it's not so difficult to be a saint. It's something He can demand of any of us, leap. But I won't leap. I sat on my bed and said to God: You've taken her, but you haven't got me yet. I know Your cunning. It's You who take us up to a high place and offer us the whole universe. You're a devil, God, tempting us to leap. But I don't want Your peace and I don't want Your love (159).

Bendrix recognizes the moment of crisis impending in his own life but struggles to preserve himself from it. He is, in fact, akin to Silentio's knight of infinite resignation, a figure who almost ascends to the same heights as a knight of faith like Abraham, but cannot make the final leap. A knight of infinite resignation willingly sacrifices his most precious possession, but in the act of doing so considers it lost and resigns himself to a life of sorrow. If, Silentio claims, Abraham had set out to sacrifice Isaac in the same way, he would be a great man, but not the father of faith. Abraham, instead, like the knight of faith, simultaneously gives up his beloved son and receives him back, trusting, by virtue of the absurd, that God will restore Isaac to him in the present life. This ability to believe the paradox – to live it out – marks the knight of faith as immeasurably greater than the still noble knight of infinite resignation. By book's end, Bendrix has reconciled himself to the loss of Sarah, but cannot make the movement of faith that would claim back her love: he has lost, and God has won. Sarah feels differently, however: her doubtful hope that "People can love without seeing each other, can't they," as she bargains with God to bring Bendrix back to life has transformed by the end of her life into an assured, continuing love of Bendrix that runs alongside her faith.[119] It is the absurdity of this paradox, more than the

[119] Ibid, 76, 90, 121.

unbelievable miracles Sarah might have caused (the healing of a man's skin condition, the saving of a boy's life), that simultaneously attracts and repels Bendrix, bringing him to the precipice of decision.[120]

The book's ending leaves Bendrix with feet still planted on the ground, unwilling to leap, but the novel's elliptical structure forces the reader to the edge of his or her own decision. In a remarkable bit of anti-climax Bendrix, now living in the same house as Henry, Sarah's widower, with whom he has struck up a friendship, closes his account with a Job-like prayer that God leave him alone forever.[121] This prayer marks a significant come down from the heights of Sarah's ecstatic belief, and apparently constitutes a final act of resignation on the part of Bendrix. Yet this ending – like that of *Brighton Rock* – is not so straightforward as it first appears. Bendrix has been concerned throughout his account with the arbitrariness of beginnings and endings. Did he choose the starting point in his story, he wonders on the novel's first page, or was a providential hand guiding him?[122] Later, as he finishes reading Sarah's last letter, he muses that "If I were writing a novel I would end it here: a novel, I used to think, has to end somewhere, but I'm beginning to believe my realism has been at fault all these years, for nothing in life now ever seems to end."[123] The seemingly arbitrary anticlimax of the novel's last page,

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[120] For a consideration of the book's view of conversion as fundamentally irrational, see Hartwig, "*The End of the Affair*: A Modernist Conversion Narrative." Renascence 69, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 149. Allen Hepburn's treatment of *The End of the Affair* focuses primarily on these miracles and their relation to saintliness and mysticism. While he provides an interesting context for these elements in the text, Hepburn errs in considering the miracles to be the primary site of religion in the text. That rather consists in Sarah's faith and how Bendrix comes to glimpse it. See Hepburn, *A Grain of Faith*, 86-129.
[121] Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 160.
[122] Ibid, 1.
[123] Ibid, 121.

then, accords with the novel's structure as an open system, where nothing can be finalized, at least by Bendrix's will alone.[124]

Greene cunningly brings readers up to the very edge of faith, a movement engendered by crisis, but leaves them there. A Bendrix conversion scene, if one existed, would veer ineluctably toward sentimentality and the saccharine. Something so individual can never be expressed directly in meaningful terms; even the reader's glimpse of Sarah's leap comes in fits and starts, sideways glances and multi-angle memories. The reader, then, must decide if Bendrix takes the final leap that will complete his movement through the stages of life: from a cynical aesthete who pursues his own pleasure, to an ethical man taking care of the widower of his lover, to a knight of infinite resignation, convinced of the loss of love, to a knight of faith willing to embrace the paradox of a love continued after the end of both the affair and Sarah's life. Like Bendrix, the book's readers must wean themselves off of an addiction to evidence. For Bendrix this occurs in part when he first reads the diary he has stolen from Sarah; expecting to see in it evidence of a new lover in her life, he encounters instead the story of her bargain and subsequent struggle toward faith, and her continuing love for him.[125] Greene's repetition of key moments and passages likewise cues readers to abandon accumulation of facts in favor of adjusted interpretation, where a deeper understanding of the real situation prompts an appropriate response – a resolute claiming of the absurd. Though Bendrix foreswears any possibility of ever

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[124] Ronald G. Walker argues that the book's narrative structure turns on a series of paradoxes, primarily surrounding Bendrix's ambiguity regarding beginnings and endings ("World Without End: An Approach to Narrative Structure in Greene's *The End of the Affair*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26, no. 2 [Summer 1984]: 223.

[125] "I wanted to treat this as a document in a case… but I hadn't that degree of calmness, for what I found when I opened the journal was not what I was expecting… I had expected plenty of evidence against her – hadn't I so often caught her out in lies? – and now here in writing that I could believe, as I couldn't believe her voice, was the complete answer" (Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 70).

leaping into God's love, the reader need not do the same: Bendrix's arbitrary ending need not be accepted as the real end of the affair of faith.

Greene, like Kierkegaard, is occasionally accused – especially in his Catholic novels – of leaning too hard into the individual at the expense of broader social and political concerns. Hence the hesitation of some critics to consider these religiously-infused novels to be of more than limited interest; Greene's religious eccentricities stand in the way of his communicating to a wider audience.[126] *The End of the Affair*, however, remains bound up in the national moment of the war through its setting amidst the Blitz, especially the central crisis brought about by a German bomb. Writer Elizabeth Bowen said, of World War II, that "What was happening was out of all proportion to our faculties for knowing, thinking, and checking up,"[127] and the frantic mental arithmetic necessitated by war contributed to a sense of continual crisis. Greene, like Nicodemus in *Midnight Hour*, creates a powerful account of wartime crisis through the very act of connecting it to personal, religious turmoil. One expression of this wartime crisis lies in the book's treatment of time and eternity, which Greene frequently intertwines to create Kierkegaardian "instants" in the narrative. As Bendrix prepares to go down to the basement, just before he gets buried in rubble, Sarah begs him to stay: "'I won't be a moment.' It was a phrase one continued to use, although one knew in those days that a moment might well be eternity long."[128] Just after this the lovers experience their own moment of eternity, as Bendrix lies apparently dead on the stairs, and Sarah makes her bargain. The eternity of this moment for Sarah, and the eternity the book builds around the moment through the continual narrative return

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[126] See, for example Lee Horsley, *Fictions of Power in English Literature: 1900-1950* (London: Longmans, 1995), 187.
[127] Quoted in Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.
[128] Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 55-6.

to this same moment, become activated by the crisis conditions of the war. The sense of crisis building before the war gets transformed here, under the excruciating pressure of bombardment, into a moment that reflects, with diamond-like clarity, the internal and external pressures of the age. Such crisis, that clears the way for a leap to faith, remains available to the reader as well: as the stolid, straightforward cup of civilization cracks under the boiling pressures of war, the individual reader can escape war's absurdities by embracing them.

### A Teleological Suspension of Admiration: The Limits of Kierkegaard

> *But just because I am a poet in that sense, one whose task is to raise the price and if possible to whisper to every individual what the demands should be, I must take particular care not to acquire any followers* – 1847 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[129]

Even as Kierkegaard became structurally important for Huxley the novelist in the mid-30s, providing a conception of life's development through crisis that sketched for Huxley a new narrative form for his books, his importance to Huxley the man was fading. Initially intrigued by Kierkegaard, Huxley found himself increasingly distant from him. An uncrossable chasm between their systems of thought emerged as early as 1937's *Ends and Means*. That text provides a key to understanding Huxley's quarrel with Kierkegaard. In it, Huxley remarks on a worrying trend of within Christian theology of stressing the transcendence of God at the expense of immanence; he links this to figures like Augustine, Calvin, Kierkegaard, and Barth. For Huxley, this stress on transcendence has disastrous results, as it leads to – and here he quotes directly from *Fear and Trembling* – "the most monstrous 'teleological suspensions of morality.'"[130] Even

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[129] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 220.

[130] *Ends and Means* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 278. This translation is a rather odd one. Huxley, presumably working from the German, as Robert Payne's translation of the book was still two years away, chooses "morality" here over what would become the standard "ethical". Also significant is the fact that he turns what is in *Fear and Trembling* a singular event – a teleological suspension of *the* ethical – into a blanket plural, "teleological suspensions."

at the time, reviewers questioned Huxley's grasp on the finer points of Kierkegaard's philosophy,[131] but this quotation is important insofar as it demonstrates his reluctance to fully embrace Kierkegaard, especially in Kierkegaard's preference for the absurd, and the specific content of traditional Christianity. The quote stays with Huxley, popping up again in *The Perennial Philosophy*, where he ties teleological suspensions of morality to human sacrifice and primitive religion.[132]

Huxley's objection to this particular phrase of Kierkegaard's makes sense against the backdrop of his resistance to organized religion more broadly. Even as he came to embrace mysticism more and more, he rigorously denied holding any system of dogma. Huxley's ambivalence toward religion comes across most clearly in his conflicted attitudes toward Catholicism. Huxley greatly admired the mystical tradition within Catholicism but contrasted it with what he saw as the wrong sort of Catholicism, the kind tied to sacraments and dogmas rather than mental prayer and mystical meditation. He considered this distasteful form of Catholicism as ascendant since the Baroque period, his meditative heroes like Francis de Sales and Catherine of Siena swept aside in favor of more garish saints like Margaret Mary Alacoque.[133] In Huxley's view, sacramentalism enables magical thinking, and encourages sentimentalism, as shown in the character of Virginia Maunciple in his 1939 satire *After Many a Summer*, whose devotion to the Blessed Virgin does nothing to curb her lustful appetites.[134] Attachment to the particular prevents attainment of the universal, and for Huxley the point of

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[131] In his review of *Ends and Means*, Evelyn Waugh cites a friend of his, an expert in Kierkegaard, who considered Huxley's understanding of Kierkegaard to be horrifically misguided. This unnamed friend was almost certainly Alec Dru, translator of the *Journals*, who happened to be Waugh's brother in law. See Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen, 1983), 213-14.
[132] *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), 172.
[133] Huxley, *Ends and Means*, 282.
[134] An excerpt from Anthony's diary compares Catholic sacramental thinking with the magical aura surrounding tractors in Soviet Russia (Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*, 566).

religion as such is the universal. Though not a Buddhist in practice, he expressed consistent admiration for the Buddhist practices of meditation that build up non-attachment in the individual.[135]

There's an undeniable element of the pragmatic in Huxley's approach to religious and mystical experience.[136] Scholars tend to doubt he had much direct experience with mysticism;[137] whether or not he felt, like William James, that he could only speak of mystical experience at second hand, his treatment of mysticism bears a strong resemblance to that of James, searching out the practical implications of mysticism without weighing in on the question of the truth of mystical experience.[138] Both James and Huxley also detected some universal impulse underlying particular religious devotions, and it is this universal that they view as most beneficial to humanity. Little wonder, then, that for Huxley the ethical stage – the proper home of the universal – takes precedence over not only the inwardness of the aesthetic, but also the more complete inwardness of the religious. Though Huxley values the individual, he also thinks the individual must continually align his or her self with the universal; to supersede the ethical is, for him, unthinkable.

If Huxley ultimately rejects the religious aspects of Kierkegaard as too individualistic, Greene's fullest embrace of Kierkegaardian individualism coincides with his loosening

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[135] See, for example, Huxley, *Letters*, 826-8.
[136] *Eyeless in Gaza* makes reference to Hans Vaihinger's massive philosophical work *The Philosophy of As If*, which advocates for the usefulness of "fictions," hypotheses whose truth content is unimportant next to their power to produce results. For a consideration of Huxley and Vaihinger, see Lothar Feitz, "Life, Literature, and the Philosophy of 'As If': Aldous Huxley's and Lawrence Durell's Use and Critique of 'Fictions,'" *Aldous Huxley Annual* 2 (2002): 72-82.
[137] For the strongest assertion of this, see Kulwat Singh Gill, "Aldous Huxley: The Quest for Synthetic Sainthood," *Modern Fiction Studies* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1981-82): 612. Julian Huxley remembers Aldous as interested in mysticism, but never a direct participant in it (*Aldous Huxley: A Memorial Volume*, ed. Julian Huxley [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], 21).
[138] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 290. Like Huxley, James evaluates saints on their impact in the world, preferring those with worldly effects rather than those of private piety (Ibid, 283-4).

association with formal religion. The influence of Kierkegaard felt in later Greene novels like *A Burnt Out Case* comes filtered through the isolated angst of French existentialism, Kierkegaard emblemizing the necessity of choice in an absurd world stripped of the consolations of faith. Whatever their reservations about or reinterpretations of Kierkegaard's work, however, both Huxley and Greene found his ideas of ruptured personal development, and the possibilities of indirect communication, clarifying in the period surrounding World War II. Kierkegaard's analysis of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages, and the movement between them, provided these two writers with a model for escaping existential and narrative paralysis.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard considers all faith as a sort of martyrdom: "The martyrdom which is always present, even if no persecution menaces from without, even if the Christian is as unnoticed in life as if he had not lived… the martyrdom of believing against the understanding, the peril of lying upon the deep, the seventy thousand fathoms, in order there to find God."[139] Such martyrdom of faith becomes all the more real when people find themselves threatened with physical death, brought terrifyingly close in the reality of wartime. In the wartime feeling of their novels, Greene and Huxley embrace the ethical, religious, and narrative uncertainty that might end in failure, turning aside equally from the safer paths of realism's gradual progress and modernism's refusal to move altogether. Despite the vast gap in their particular beliefs, Huxley and Greene agree with each other – and with Kierkegaard – that to be free, in life and literature, one must first choose and leap.

[139] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 208.

# Chapter 2: The Attack Upon Christendom – Muriel Spark's and Flann O'Brien's Maieutic Satires

> *[My original idea was] that Christianity required a 'maieuticer' and that I understood how to be one – while no one understood how to appreciate it. The idea of proclaiming Christianity, of confessing Christ, does not fit in with Christendom – that is exactly where the maieutic attitude fits in, which begins by assuming that men are in possession of the greatest good and only tries to make them aware of what they have* – 1847 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[1]

"She would of been a good woman… if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." So says The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's most famous short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." He speaks of a woman known only as The Grandmother, a woman he has just shot three times after encountering her with her family on vacation. Throughout most of the story, The Grandmother dominates the narrative, complaining loudly about changing customs and the bad manners of her grandchildren, and making herself out to be a real lady. O'Connor's understated, dry narration makes clear, however, that The Grandmother, far from being the paragon of virtue she imagines herself to be, is in fact a pharisaical, deeply unpleasant woman. Only her confrontation with death activates whatever grace exists within her, as she comforts the scarred Misfit, murmuring "Why, you're one of my own babies. You're one of my own children!" just before he shoots her dead.[2] The story elicits a wide range of affective responses: shock, horror, repulsion – but also laughter. It is the paradigmatic example of O'Connor's method of confronting complacent Christianity with the crisis of violence, painted in a satirical mode.

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and translated by Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 199.
[2] Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 133-4.

While O'Connor's blend of Southern gothic, pitch black humor, and Catholic theology marked her stories with an unmistakable imprimatur, her general approach – satirizing rote religion through grotesque exaggeration – was quite typical of Catholic authors of the post-war period. In fact, the midcentury saw the flourishing of a robust brand of Catholic satire; from O'Connor and Walker Percy in the American South, to Heinrich Böll in Germany, to Muriel Spark and Flann O'Brien in Britain and Ireland, Catholic authors sought to expose the follies of contemporary society through satirical fiction. Aside from their religion, these writers shared a basic sensibility of isolation – O'Brien excepted, they all lived in countries where a small Catholic minority navigated a changing social status amidst broader, tectonic shifts in national religious belief.[3] They also all shared an unusual but important common reference point: the work of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's significance for Walker Percy has been well attested by the author himself, and studied at length, but the Danish philosopher made a strong impression on all of these authors.[4] In particular, Kierkegaard's critique of "Christendom", his term for the deracinated practice of state-sponsored, bourgeois Christianity, gave these Catholic

[3] And O'Brien, though in the Catholic majority, experienced the social isolation endemic to Irish authors, what Augustine Martin has termed "Inherited dissent" from mainstream Irish society ("Inherited Dissent: The Dilemma of the Irish Writer," in *Bearing Witness: Essays on Anglo-Irish Literature*, ed. Anthony Roche [Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1996], 81).

[4] For a good summary of Kierkegaard's influence on Percy, see Joseph Ballan, "Walker Percy: Literary Extrapolations from Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources Vol. 12 Tome IV*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 175-189. O'Connor's relation to Kierkegaard is underexplored, but a start exists in Christopher B. Barnett, "Flannery O'Connor: Reading Kierkegaard in the Light of Thomas Aquinas," in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources Vol. 12 Tome IV*, ed. Jon Stewart (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 157-174. Barnett specifically connects the character of the Grandmother to Kierkegaard's description of the "philistine-bourgeois mentality" found in *The Sickness Unto Death*, a book O'Connor had read the year before writing "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (164). Heinrich Boll's novel *The Clown* references Kierkegaard several times in its satire of German Catholics in the wake of World War II. O'Brien read Kierkegaard in his formative time during or just after his education at University College Dublin, and had a great affinity for the Danish philosopher, though what specific works he read remains unknown. Given the timeline, however, which places his encounter with Kierkegaard in the late 1930s, it seems reasonable to assume he had read some combination of *Philosophical Fragments*, *Fear and Trembling*, Dru's selection of the *Journals*, and Lowrie's biography, any of which would have introduced him to the key concept of indirect communication and the need for detached derision. See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* [London: Grafton Books, 1989], 56-7. See also M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 125. For Spark's interaction with Kierkegaard, see below.

authors ammunition for confronting the rote practice of Christianity in their own day, while Kierkegaard's practice of irony as a means of indirect communication, and his insistent attempts to disappear as author of his own work, demonstrated for them a method through which the author as single individual might preserve his or her individuality through detachment, yet retain a vantage point for critiquing society.

In this chapter I examine the Kierkegaardian contours of the satires written by Muriel Spark and Flann O'Brien in the late 1950s and early 1960s, taking as case studies O'Brien's final two novels, *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, and two of the novels produced in Spark's initial creative burst, *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori*. Though O'Brien and Spark inhabited radically different circumstances during this period – with O'Brien's failed career drawing to a bitter close just as Spark's career as a critically acclaimed novelist was beginning – the two authors produced novels in this period that resonate remarkably in terms of style, tone, and purpose. By reading O'Brien's and Spark's novels of this period in conversation with Kierkegaard's ideas of ironic indirect communication, I show how their commitment to a satirical method that was simultaneously detached in tone yet suffused with moral content differentiated their work not only from the traditional modes of satire, but also from the "non-moral" satire of modernism, the equally non-moral social commentary of a reemergent post-war realism, and the ludic indifference of postmodernism. Instead, Spark and O'Brien were prime exemplars of what I will call the practice of "maieutic satire".

Maieutic satire allows authors to share important ethical and religious concepts with readers, but to do so in indirect and aesthetically complex ways. A "maiueticer" – for Kierkegaard, the primary examples are Socrates and Christ, though he considers himself to follow in their path –has attained some truth, but avoids giving direct insights into this truth,

using irony to push away would-be followers in the hope of making these followers self-sufficient. Maieutic satire, then, never loses sight of what it views as truth, but refuses to make plain for the reader what that truth is, or how to access it. In doing so, this midcentury satire charts a new path forward out of modernism, embracing neither of the options famously outlined by David Lodge – neither the anti-modernism of the realists nor post-modernism adequately describes its project.[5] Instead, this satire utilizes experimental and off-putting aesthetics as a means of occluding the truths it holds dear. Consequently, maieutic satire shifts the traditional emphasis of moral satire away from large-scale social reform towards a confrontation with the individual reader. By clearing away the detritus surrounding the bland practice of institutional Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic, while simultaneously satirizing the shortcomings of secular materialism, Spark and O'Brien sketched in their work, in hints and guesses, an image of what a living Christianity might look like. That they did this work of clearance from a position of detachment allows readers to wrestle for themselves with the extent to which they, too, have absorbed the indifference of Christendom. If the practice of this type of satire raises the possibility that many will not understand, or will misinterpret its message, this is a risk that Spark and O'Brien, like their forerunner Kierkegaard, were willing to take.

Kierkegaard is an especially apt conversation partner for Spark because his work, notably the *Journals*, formed an early, important, and largely uncommented on source for Spark the novelist. Though her writing style has often been described as *sui generis*, scholars generally

[5] See Lodge, David, "The Novelist at the Crossroads," in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 100-102. For an assessment of Spark as avoiding these two paths, see David Herman, "'A Salutary Scar': Muriel Spark's Desegregated Art in the Twenty-First Century," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 473-4.

recognize a few key influences on her writing.[6] In the realm of fiction, Evelyn Waugh sticks out as an inspiration, along with the dry, spare writing of Ivy Compton-Burnett, and, in mid-career, the novels of the French *noveau roman* movement.[7] Most significant for Spark's development as a writer was the non-fiction work of fellow convert John Henry Newman, whose praises Spark constantly sang. Scholars have long recognized Newman as a key influence on both Spark's understanding of Catholic practice and the clarity and simplicity of her style.[8] The attention rightly paid to Newman, however, has crowded out Kierkegaard's influence on Spark.[9]

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[6] For references to Spark's work as *sui generis*, see, for example, Herman, "A Salutary Scar," 473, and John Updike, "Stonewalling Toffs," in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, ed, Robert E. Hosmer, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 184.

[7] As a note of interest, Spark greatly admired the work of Heinrich Böll, significant not only because of the connections to Catholicism and Kierkegaard, but because Spark specifically admired him for "The variety and steadiness of his vision and its extra-territorial dimensions; and for the stamina of his patient, almost documentary style… Whatever pains he takes as an author, they do not show" (*The Golden Fleece*, ed. Penelope Jardine [Manchester: Carcanet House, 2014], 155). Such praise speaks to Spark's valuing of detachment and authorial hiddenness.

[8] For perhaps the best overall treatment of Spark and Newman, see Leon Litvack, "We All Have Something to Hide: Muriel Spark, Autobiography, and the Influence of Newman on the Career of a Novelist," *Durham University Journal* 86, no. 55 (1994): 281-9. On the topic of conversion in Spark's novels, which she argues follows the gradualist pattern laid out by Newman, see Benilde Montgomery, "Spark and Newman: Jean Brodie Reconsidered," *Twentieth Century Literature* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 95. On this point see also Helena C. Tomko, "Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* at the Limits of the Catholic Novel," *Religion and Literature* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 49. For Spark's own thoughts on Newman's importance to her life and work, see "My Conversion," in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. Joseph Hynes (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992): 24.

[9] I have only found one direct attempt to tie Spark to Kierkegaard, a very brief passage in Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 80-1. Gabriel Josipovici does bring up Kierkegaard in relation to Spark, but only as a more general reference point for situating her work – and Josipocivi seems dismissive of the specifically religious content of both authors ("The Large Testimony of Muriel Spark," in *Hidden Possibilities: Essays in Honor of Muriel Spark*, 19-21). For an interesting discussion of Newman and Kierkegaard, see George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 194-8. Pattison argues that "Newman shared with Kierkegaard the view that Christian faith was in certain key respects scandalous to the unregenerate human mind… he was equally clear that the kind of reason appropriate to faith was very different from that found amongst adherents of modern, post-Enlightenment, scientific and technical reason" (194-5). Comparisons between Newman and Kierkegaard are surprisingly frequent. Auden connects the two in his introduction to the Kierkegaard anthology *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, noting that "both men were faced with the problem of preaching to a secularized society which was still officially Christian, and neither was a naïve believer, so that in each case one is conscious when reading their work that they are preaching to two congregations, one outside and one inside the pulpit" (3). Nathan A. Scott, Jr. goes so far as to assert that Kierkegaard and Newman alone among modern theologians have been "influenced in any decisive way by poetic methods and modalities" (*The Poetics of Belief: Studies in Coleridge, Arnold, Pater, Santayana, Stevens, and Heidegger* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985], 11). Theodor Haecker, so important to Kierkegaard's translation into English via his German translations, also translated Newman into German, a process which hastened his own conversion to Catholicism. Haecker directly connects Kierkegaard and Newman as similar types, figures who appear in defense of vigorous Christianity at the very time when "Christianity should long since

According to her biographer Martin Stannard, Spark received from a friend a copy of Alexander Dru's translation of the *Journals* in 1953, a year before her conversion to Catholicism.[10] She mentions the *Journals* in her early short story "Bang Bang, You're Dead," where a character with biographical parallels to Spark (as a woman immigrant to colonial Africa trapped in an unhappy marriage) experiences a revelation while reading the book.[11] Spark's love for the *Journals* continued throughout her life; in 1981 she mentions the book among a list of "old favourites," putting the book in the same company as Shakespeare's sonnets and the dialogs of Plato.[12] Spark's extended interaction with the *Journals* gave her a thorough exposure to Kierkegaard's disregard for complacent Christianity, as well as his ideas about the usefulness of irony and indirect communication.[13] She seems early on to have grasped Kierkegaard's intention to provoke the reader out of complacency; in 1956 (a year before her debut as a novelist), reviewing an anthology of Kierkegaard selections put together by T.H. Croxall, she asserted that "As was Kierkegaard's way, partly his intention, these meditations provoke resistance, reservations, qualifications, as well as assent or mere admiration; the main thing is that they do not leave the reader indifferent unless he is indifferent to religion."[14] The transformation of

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have become an archaeological question and a joke" (*Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. with a biographical note by Alexander Dru [London: Oxford University Press, 1937], 57-8).

[10] *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 157.

[11] "Sybil lay in bed in the mornings reading the translation of Kierkegaard's *Journals*, newly arrived from England in their first, revelatory month of publication. She felt like a desert which had not realised its own aridity till the rain began to fall on it" (Muriel Spark, *All the Stories of Muriel Spark* [New York: New Directions, 2001], 59.

[12] *The Golden Fleece*, 160.

[13] In September of 1953 Spark reviewed a memoir about Simone Weil, written by two of the thinker's friends, for *The Observer*. Discussing the fact that Weil almost converted to Roman Catholicism but did not, Spark assesses Weil's character as a sort of gadfly: "She was, in fact, of the order of independent Christians who seem expressly appointed as a living rebuke to Christendom, an embarrassment and stimulus to the Church" ("Awkward Saint," *The Observer* (London) Sep. 20 1953, 10). The wording of this description seems to owe a heavy debt to Kierkegaard's *Journals*, especially since Spark also describes Weil as a "witness," the very word used by Kierkegaard to describe the person who opposes Christendom (See Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 259-60).

[14] *The Golden Fleece*, 201.

indifference into activity would prove equally important in Spark's own novelistic technique, and for similar reasons: she shared Kierkegaard's distrust of complacent, assumed religion.

Key to Spark's indirect communication in her early novels, as with O'Brien's later novels, is the sense of detachment that runs through them. Many critics would agree with John Updike that "Detachment is the genius of her fiction," and with Frank Kermode's description of her fiction as laid out from above, like a satellite image, providing a detached view of the whole.[15] But to what end does Spark employ this detachment? Some see her detachment as cruel, but more sympathetic critics argue that her detachment nudges readers toward an unsettled state where "What is required… is that the reader should be continually on duty."[16] Spark's arousal of the reader's awareness involves a Kierkegaardian act of "taking away," where she deprives the reader of the traditional affective comforts of literature. Addressing the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1971, Spark laid out her vision of what literature should aim to accomplish, decrying sentimental literature as a "segregated art" that cuts the reader off from reality, and suggesting in its place:

> A less impulsive generosity, a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong. I would like to see less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts…The art of ridicule, if it is on the mark – and if it is not true on the mark it is not art at all – can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyze its object… To bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time, and above all to entertain us in the process, has become the special calling of arts and of letters.[17]

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[15] Quoted in Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*, 14; Frank Kermode, introduction, to Muriel Spark, *Four Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2004), X.
[16] Frank Kermode, "The Novel as Jerusalem: Muriel Spark's *Mandelbaum Gate*," in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. Joseph Hynes (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992), 184. See also Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*, 11; and David Lodge, "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*," in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. Joseph Hynes (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992), 153.
[17] "The Desegregation of Art," in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, 35-7.

To combine aesthetic pleasure with ethical content, a combination achieved through the *via negativa* of derision: this is the goal of the artist, according to Spark. The unnerving, salutary scars of satire push the reader, especially in early Spark novels like *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori*, away from deadening complacency toward self-awareness and engagement with reality. In employing this method, Spark heeded Kierkegaard's advice in the *Journals* that "Sometimes it is healthy to keep a wound open: a healthy open wound; sometimes it is worse when they close."[18] That O'Brien's late novels utilized a similar sense of detachment suggests that both authors felt the need to respond to the social ills of Christendom with a clear, unsentimental vision.

**Maieutic Satire in Midcentury**

> *No direct or immediate transition to Christianity exists. All who in this manner propose to give the individual a rhetorical push into Christianity, or perhaps even to help him by administering a beating, all these are deceivers – nay, they know not what they do. –* Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*[19]

The embrace of indirect communication in the post-war period sprang from aesthetic, as well as religious, concerns. While the boom in postwar realism ushered in by the Angry Young Men rejected the aesthetic experimentation of modernism, it shared with modernism a relative indifference to ethics. Certain authors, however, resisted the new realism and the residues of modernism equally, critiquing both trends on grounds that were simultaneously aesthetic and ethical. Critics have frequently lumped Spark together with two other novelists of the same generation who shared her aesthetic and ethical impatience with the status quo: Iris Murdoch and William Golding.[20] Murdoch herself addressed the question of morality and aesthetics in fiction

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[18] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 138.
[19] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 47.
[20] For these three as writing fictions with "strange god-shapes," see MacKay, Marina and Lyndsey Stonebridge, "Introduction," in *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century*, ed. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey

as adroitly as anyone in her essay "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch." In this essay she connects the dominance of liberal democracy's preference for individual freedom to the floundering of aesthetics in the British novel; her solution entails a "Renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons."[21] Such difficulty had aesthetic implications for Murdoch as well as ethical ones, because it prompted a more thoughtful, thoroughly *written* style than what Murdoch categorized as the two dominant types of novel in post-war Britain, the crystalline (beautifully written, but expressive of nothing) and journalistic; categories that correspond roughly to modernist and realist techniques. The struggle to create a new form for the British novel that confronted ethical dilemmas while avoiding the crystalline and the journalistic styles can be seen in Murdoch's own novelistic output of the 1950s and 60s, including in her Kierkegaardian novel *A Severed Head*.

Spark took the criticisms of postwar literature forwarded by Murdoch – an agnostic Platonist – even further through her particularly Catholic critique of literary dullness. Marina MacKay has traced the post-war dissatisfaction with the Protestant novel among Catholic writers and pinpoints the gradualist moral development and explicit characterization typical of this form as a sticking point for Catholic novelists like Spark. Speaking of Spark's propensity for opaque characterizations, MacKay argues that "The freest character is the least realized" became a central tenet of Spark's authorship.[22] Even as she subjects her characters to the most ruthless

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Stonebridge (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4. For a productive pairing of Spark with Golding and J.R.R. Tolkien regarding the nature of evil, see Robert Eaglestone, "The Question of Evil in Post-war British Fiction," in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*. Vol. VII, ed. Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53-63.

[21] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 30.

[22] "Catholicism, Character, and the Invention of the Liberal Novel Tradition," *Twentieth Century Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer, 2002): 231. Earlier in the piece, MacKay, assessing *Northanger Abbey*, quotes Tom Woodman's description of that "Distinctively British tendency to believe that Christianity is simply a matter of being an ordinary decent individual" (220). This equivalence between Christianity and decency, which as MacKay argues forms one

surveillance, Spark erases her own presence from her novels as much as possible, preserving her authorial freedom. Talking of her conversion to Catholicism, Spark captures some of the paradox involved in her own narrative voice when she asserts both that "I find I speak far more with my own voice as a Catholic… [Before conversion] I was talking and writing with other people's voices all the time," and that her narrators are themselves characters, since "Every theme demands a different sort of commentator, a different intellectual attitude."[23] In essence, this means that while Spark found in Catholicism the resource to speak from her own viewpoint – to forego imitation of other authors – she also gained access to a range of narrative voices that allowed her to disguise her presence in the text. A direct echo of Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication, where the different pseudonymous authors worked to disguise the underlying purposes of Kierkegaard's authorship, Spark's multiplicity of voices filtered her own authorial presence through the aesthetic complexities of various narrative viewpoints.

O'Brien enacted a similar rejection of prior models in his late-career repudiation of his own early work and the influence of James Joyce. When critical rediscovery of *At Swim-Two-Birds* brought O'Brien belated accolades in the 1950s – and gave publishers enough interest for O'Brien to write his final two novels – he nevertheless dismissed his debut novel as "mere juvenilia," and seemed genuinely annoyed that the book might be the one to secure his reputation.[24] Likewise O'Brien repeatedly distanced himself from the shadow of Joyce; perhaps understandably, given how frequently *At Swim-Two-Birds* drew comparisons to Joyce's work, and how often Joyce's own endorsement of O'Brien's debut got trotted out in support of the book's importance. O'Brien's rejection of Joyce's legacy reaches its apex in *The Dalkey Archive*,

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important pillar supporting the British Liberal novel, suggests the complacency of Christendom that Kierkegaard resists, and that O'Brien and Spark attack in their fiction.

[23] Spark, "My Conversion," 26-7.

[24] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 211.

where Joyce himself becomes a character, one who strenuously denies having written the books attributed to him, regarding them as smutty trash. As O'Brien himself argued, his treatment of Joyce had less to do with the man himself than the mythical critical apparatus that surrounded works like *Ulysses*.[25] At the same time, as Keith Donohue has argued, O'Brien's movement away from Joyce had as much to do with differing aesthetic and ethical goals as with personal animosity. Per Donohue, while Joyce saw the artist as a sympathetic figure intuitively in touch with the world, O'Brien's conception of the artist moved ever further "Toward the artist as master of abstract feeling, exposing both form and content as artificial."[26] In O'Brien's late novels this abstraction finds form as extreme detachment: the author as absent presence. At the same time, the depictions of Irish society in his final two novels gain a granular specificity missing from the more fantastical early novels; O'Brien's late novels take place not in the Ireland of myth or stage, but the Ireland of post-independence drudgery, where self-important complacency has become all too common.

It was this delicate balancing act between ethico-religious content and detached tone that separated Spark and O'Brien's work from previous models of satire, as well as non-satirical contemporary fiction. Speaking broadly, traditional satire has fallen into two categories.[27] The first category takes as the target of its ridicule the moral failings of a particular society, and attacks its targets with affective intensity, marshalling anger and disgust in its denunciation of hypocrisy, corruption, and overweening ambition. The second type of satire – often called

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[25] See Ronald L. Dotterer, "Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, and The Dalkey Archive," *New Hibernia Review* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 54-63. For *The Hard Life* as a rejection of the Irish mythos of Joyce's work, see Mary Power, "Flann O'Brien and Classical Satire: An Exegesis of The Hard Life," *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 13, no. 1 (1978): 89.

[26] *The Writer as Self-Evident Sham: Flann O'Brien's Comic Vision* (Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 2001), 344.

[27] The classic discussion of satire as a genre comes in Northrop Frye, *An Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 223-239. A good contemporary overview of the topic can be found in Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Menippean – employs a more detached tone, in part because it aims at intellectual, rather than ethical, follies. Given its cynical appraisal of all systems of thought as doomed to failure, it is no surprise that Menippean satire assumes an air of detached superiority with regard to its targets.[28] What was new and unique in Kierkegaardian satire – especially as it became practiced in its novelistic form by these Catholic authors of the twentieth century – was the combination of moral satire's strong, particular conceptions of moral and ethical correctness with Menippean satire's detachment of tone. While maieutic satire agrees with moral satire that society is rife with problems, it seeks change only at the level of the individual, a task for which moral satire's angry stance is ill suited, since the anger motivating social reform turns the gaze of the individual outwards. At the same time, this satire concurs with Menippean satire that detachment allows for the best puncturing of folly, but it rejects the Menippean tendency to resignation and remains committed to the possibility of positive ethical change at the level of the individual. Instead, maieutic satire occupies an ethical vantage point but aims primarily at developing the individual's self-awareness, a goal it seeks to accomplish by holding up a mirror to the individual that exposes the individual's own follies, an image undistorted by affective response of any sort.

Moving from the conceptual to the historical, the satire of Spark and O'Brien differed importantly from other contemporaneous practices of satire. Following Wyndham Lewis, the satire practiced by many British modernists also deviated from traditional categories of satire, but in the opposite direction from Spark and O'Brien's satire, tending to be both non-moral and more affectively charged than what would follow post-war.[29] There was a savagery, a heatedness

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[28] Frye asserts that "Satire on ideas is only the special kind of art that defends its own creative detachment" (231). The most famous discussion of the attributes of Menippean satire occurs in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 112-122.

[29] The best overview of modernist satire can be found in Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the*

to Lewis' style that fit oddly with his insistence on the non-moral, surface-focused nature of his satire, an anger which led to Hugh Kenner's memorable epithet for Lewis: the satirist as barbarian.[30] As Alan Bold notes, this savagery is at odds with Spark's more restrained style, a restraint shared by O'Brien's late work.[31] Evelyn Waugh – the most obvious predecessor to Spark, as a Catholic convert and satirical novelist – possessed strong convictions and a certain detachedness in tone, but rarely simultaneously: his earlier, more detached novels display a certain Menippean non-moral anarchy, while his later, more moral works come laced with an obvious bitterness in tone.[32]

The realist fiction of the post-war novelists associated with the Angry Young Men favored descriptive precision over any prescriptive ethics, and indeed flaunted its willingness to transgress norms, while prizing the strong, obvious connections between author and creation.[33]

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*Modern British Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Both Greenberg and Colletta claim for modernist satire a lack of commitment to any particular ethical viewpoint.

[30] "Wyndham Lewis: The Satirist as Barbarian," in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson and Jenny Mezciems (New York: Blackwell, 1984), 264-75. For Lewis' own statements on satire, see *Men Without Art*, ed. Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 85-89. Though Lewis' satire does depend on detachment and impersonality, his satires retain a fierceness and a lack of restraint characteristic of his self-styled role as "The Enemy". For Lewis and impersonality, see Heather Arvidson, "Personality, Impersonality, and the Personified Detachment of Wyndham Lewis," *Modernism/Modernity* 25, no. 4 (November 2018): 791-814. Arvidson argues that Lewis "rewires" the impersonality of Eliot into what she calls "personified detachment," which provides him distance from the objects of his critique while allowing a "Foregrounded authorial presence" – quite different from Spark's disappearing author (792-3). See also Melania Terrazas, "Wyndham Lewis' Theories of Satire and the Practice of Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis*, ed. Tyrus Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 61-71. Terrazas sees in Lewis' "violent" and "crude" writing a "Sustained attempt to make a critique of existing reality grounded in a rejection of any form of dogmatism" (61).

[31] "Not for her the hyperbolic savagery, the verbal overkill, of Swift or Wyndham Lewis" (Alan Bold, introduction to *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, ed. Alan Bold [London: Vision Press, 1984], 10).

[32] For tone in Waugh's early novels, see Robert Frick, "Style and Structure in the Early Novels of Evelyn Waugh," *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 28, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 419-23. For a slightly different take that identifies traces of Waugh's later longings for pre-modern Europe even in the early works, see James W. Nichols, "Romantic and Realistic: The Tone of Evelyn Waugh's Early Novels," *College English* 24, no. 1 (October 1962), 56. Jonathan Greenberg senses that in Waugh's transitional novel *A Handful of Dust* "The very tone characteristic of Waugh's satiric method itself begins to break down… [it] tells the story of the dissolution of *satire*; in it Waugh both thematizes and enacts the breakdown of the comic-ironic sensibility that characterizes his earlier work" (*Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, 71).

[33] Looking back on the beginning of her career, Spark remarks that "I think it was getting very dull around the time of the Angry Young Men. I think that something had to shake it up, in the way of another dimension. I was hoping to do that" (Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark," in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan [Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002], 216). For more on the

Those realist authors who traded in satire, notably Kingsley Amis, seemed to follow Wyndham Lewis in mixing non-moral satire with an affective register containing anger and disgust. Across the Atlantic, the 1950s and 60s saw a flourishing of political and social satire which depended on the anger of the outsider to power its critiques of conformist American culture.[34] Finally, the postmodern fiction that would emerge in the 1960s and 70s – a movement with which Spark and O'Brien are often linked as forerunners – would value the erasure of the author, but an erasure at odds with Spark and O'Brien's conceptions of it.[35] Postmodern fiction, like Menippean satire, tended to practice fiction that was non-moral and detached, a fact that accounts for frequent critical association of postmodern authors with Menippean practice – including, erroneously, O'Brien.[36] It is precisely this unique combination – moral firmness with aesthetic detachment – that has led to such divisive critical debate on the proper way to categorize the work of Spark and O'Brien.

While earlier authors like Huxley and Greene utilized Kierkegaardian ideas about the stages of life to create new methods of character development, Spark and O'Brien largely

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Angry Young Men, see Colin Wilson, *The Angry Years* (London: Robson, 2007); and Humphrey Carpenter, *The Angry Young Men: A Literary Comedy of the 1950s* (London: Penguin, 2002).

[34] See Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). Kercher identifies the primary motivation of these liberal satirists as the desire to expose reality and destroy artifice.

[35] For a good discussion of the ambiguity of Spark's interactions with the postmodern *noveau roman* movement in her novels of the 1970s, see Ian Rankin, "The Deliberate Cunning of Muriel Spark," in *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams*, ed. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP; 1993), 41-53.

[36] See Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire*, 17-8, 47. The designation of Menippean satire has been attached to O'Brien repeatedly in recent criticism. Dieter Fuchs explicitly ties the usefulness of Menippean satire in Ireland into the ongoing strict control exercised by the Catholic Church, again failing to square O'Brien's satirical bent with his devotion to Catholicism ("*The Dalkey Archive*: A Menippean Satire against Authority," in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, ed. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt [Cork: Cork University Press, 2017], 233. It might be fair to consider O'Brien's first three novels more Menippean, especially *The Third Policeman*, which concentrates largely on intellectual folly. By his late period, however, O'Brien narrows in on ethical critiques of his characters; he also largely abandons the fantastical elements of his earlier works, fantasy being another element of Menippean satire. For the conflation of postmodernism and Menippean satire in a very different context, see Theodore D. Kharpetian, *A Hand to Turn the Time: The Menippean Satires of Thomas Pynchon* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 13-57.

abstained from character development in favor of static, almost caricatural figures who they set to work in their theater of ideas. Like Kierkegaard, they might be accused of acting as puppet masters over their characters, but they enacted their strict control in the service of satires that draw the reader in through aesthetic openness; the affective gaps in the text brought about by the unfreedom of the characters elicit an active response from the reader. As Wayne C. Booth argues, "Distance is never an end in itself; distance along one axis is sought for the sake of increasing the reader's involvement along some other axis."[37] By severing any positive affective engagement with the text, Spark and O'Brien force the astute reader into a grappling with his or her own folly, since every reader will potentially find some character in the text who acts as a reflection of his or her own vices.

Crucially, even anger is absent from the affective register of these satires. The absence of anger clearly separates this strain of satire from earlier practices of the form; not only the satires of Lewis and the modernists, but previous giants like Swift, who saw satire as a means of enacting societal reform. Anger prompts the reader to turn outward, identifying problems in society at large. Maieutic satire, by maintaining a flat or neutral affect, does not afford the reader the option of evading their own problems, nor does it allow the reader to depict their own vices as tragic or sympathetic (as a non-satirical novel might). Neither does it line up with the aims of Menippean satire that seeks to undermine all systems of thought. Since Menippean satire takes as a starting premise the idea that all forms of knowledge and structures of authority are irredeemably rotted, it enacts a sort of literary nihilism, where injustices and follies are not worth getting angry about, since they form the *status quo* of human existence. Readers, then, receives a reprieve from Menippean satire: if they are fools too, they cannot change their plight. With

[37] *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 123.

maieutic satire, however, the individual reader gets indicted as a fool, just like every other member of modern society, but his or her folly can be measured against an unwavering standard, the demands of truth – in the case of O'Brien and Spark, the truth of the Catholic Church. Spark, crediting her conversion with giving her the tools needed to write novels, asserts that "I'm quite sure that my conversion gave me something to work on as a satirist. The Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart."[38] It is this combination of an unwavering norm with a technique that only hints at that norm that gives the satires of Spark and O'Brien their Kierkegaardian nature, an indirectness that has made them difficult for critics to pin down. Their satire cannot be categorized under previous models of the genre; it represents a new form, responsive to the pressures of modern life, that combines static ethics with fluid aesthetics.

**Indirect Communication and Satire in Kierkegaard's Christendom**

> *The* category *of my work is:* to make men aware *of Christianity, and consequently I always say: I am not an example, for otherwise all would be confusion. My task is to deceive people, in a true sense, into entering the sphere of religious obligation which they have done away with; but I am without authority. Instead of authority I make use of the very reverse, I say: the whole thing is my own education. That, once again, is a truly socratic discovery. Just as he was ignorant, in my case it is: instead of being the teacher, being the one who is educated*– 1849 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[39]

The two scholars to document in any detail Kierkegaard's entrance into British culture, George Pattison and Peter A. Schilling, both argue that the philosopher's popularity reached an early peak with the waging of World War II and declined precipitously in the period afterward. Pattison and Schilling suggest that this had in part to do with the passing of the sense of crisis fomented by the war – as optimism returned, Kierkegaard became less salient as a coping

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[38] Spark, "My Conversion," 26. Spark says something similar, but even more strongly worded, in a conversation with Ian Gillham: "The Catholic faith gives us a norm from which we can depart: to write effective satire there has to be a norm" ("Keeping It Short – Muriel Spark talks about her books to Ian Gillham," *The Listener* 24 [September 1970]: 411).

[39] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 348.

mechanism.[40] Kierkegaard's decline in popularity seems inarguable, but also historically apt, since Kierkegaard's visibility waned during a time similar to the one he wrote against in his works. Kierkegaard, while the voice of crisis, wrote in a time that he saw as largely devoid of crisis. He wrote specifically to imbue the bourgeois, contented Copenhagen of his lifetime with a sense of the urgency of religious belief. Given that his contemporaneous countrymen largely ignored his writings, there is a certain appropriateness in the fact that his star faded in Britain at the exact time he would have felt himself most needed: the re-establishment of Christianity as a status quo in the post-war period would have spurred him on to continued assaults on rote religion.

Tracing Kierkegaard's continuing imprint on British culture after World War II, then, entails turning from the obvious contact point of crisis-catalyzed character change, the *what* of Kierkegaard's movement between the stages of life that most influenced Huxley and Greene, to the *how*, Kierkegaard's maieutic method. In seeking to communicate with his fellow Danes about religious truth, and to rouse them from their complacency, Kierkegaard utilized indirect communication, especially in the early, pseudonymous period. For Kierkegaard to preach a sermon to his contemporaries on the truths of Christianity would have done them little good, because as members of Christendom they knew the words and dogmas already. Instead, Kierkegaard saw his goal as deceiving his readers into understanding Christianity anew by first making it strange and difficult, and by peeling away the detritus of false Christianity through ridicule. He portrayed indirect communication as the art of taking away:

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[40] Pattison, George, "Great Britain: From the 'Prophet of Now' to Postmodern Ironist (and after)," in *Søren Kierkegaard's International Reception Tome I*, ed. Jon Stewart (London: Routledge, 2009), 256-7. See also Schilling, Peter A, *Søren Kierkegaard and Anglo-American Literary Culture of the Thirties and Forties* (Dissertation, Columbia University, 1994), 197-201. Schilling identifies Kierkegaard's apoliticism as another reason for decline during the building tensions of the Cold War.

> Because everybody knows it, the Christian truth has gradually become a triviality, of which it is difficult to secure a primitive impression. This being the case, the art of *communication* at last becomes the art of *taking away*, of luring something away from someone… When a man has his mouth so full of food that he is prevented from eating, and is like to starve in consequence, does giving him food consist in stuffing still more of it in his mouth, or does it consist in taking some of it away, so that he can begin to eat?[41]

The necessity of religious communication as a taking away connects Kierkegaard's moment to the midcentury in Britain and Ireland, where religious terminology remained prevalent enough to be familiar to a general populace raised in the atmosphere of Christendom. Other methods of religious communication gaining traction after World War II, notably the religious crusades of Billy Graham and religious broadcasting made available over the radio, aimed to reach mass audiences with direct restatements of Christian doctrine. Though crusades and radio programming proved immensely popular in the post-war years, they failed to spark thoroughgoing revival, their influence quickly spluttering.[42] Kierkegaard would say that their method of communication had doomed them from the start: direct communication about religion broadcast to the masses would by its very nature fail to convey the realities of Christianity. Instead, the individual must be goaded toward religious truth through the helpful deceit of indirect communication.

Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, or fictional authors, themselves constituted a main avenue for his indirect communication, for they take away the certainty of direct statement through their dialectic multiplicity. Hence my preference for referring to them as fictional authors: they do not merely disguise Kierkegaard's true opinions under a false name but represent distinct viewpoints

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[41] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 245.

[42] For more on Graham's crusades, see Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6. It's possible that the rise of radio and then T.V. actually contributed to the decline in active church membership, as people substituted on air religious programming for attendance at physical churches. See S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 81-2. For a discussion of the BBC's move away from religious programming in the 1960s, see Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity: 1920-2000*, *4th Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 518.

in their own right, viewpoints that interact with each other over the course of the pseudonymous works. Kierkegaard strove to create distance between his position as author and the position of the reader by erasing the traditional authority of the author-figure. As one fictional author, Johannes Climacus, says of the fictional personalities A and B of *Either/Or*, "The fact that there is no author is a means of keeping the reader at a distance".[43] For Flann O'Brien and Muriel Spark, as for the midcentury Catholic satirists more generally, authorial distance would prove key in their method of satirizing religious complacency. O'Brien – real name Brian O'Nolan – famously wrote under several pseudonyms, but the more interesting technique of distancing found in his later work, a technique he shares with Spark, consists in deploying narrative distance through cold, affectless tone. This deadpan presentation works to defamiliarize and discomfort readers, in the process forcing them to consider uncomfortable topics like hypocrisy and death not as traits or events happening to outlandish fictional characters, but as directly relevant to the life of the reader.

By blandly yet ruthlessly depicting the empty folly of their characters, Spark and O'Brien encouraged their readers to identify folly in their own lives, without being waylaid by verbal pyrotechnics, distracting sympathy, or the presence of the author. This absence of authorial presence leaves the reader without a sure guide through the follies they witness on the page, creating gaps of affect where the reader does not immediately know the proper emotional response. These affective gaps elicit an active response in the reader, a response Kierkegaard discussed when praising those of Plato's dialogs that end not "In a result but a sting." The method of learning allowed by indirectness forces the reader to slow down and consider his or

[43] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 226. This evaluation comes in the midst of a section in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* called "A Glance at Contemporary Danish Literature," where Climacus runs through the whole of the pseudonymous authorship, constantly mentioning how he intended to say exactly the same things as these other authors. It is perhaps the most meta-literary moment in Kierkegaard's corpus.

her position, a reaction which contrasts strongly with the rote learning of direct communication, which "Says everything as quickly as possible and all at once" and only enables the learner to repeat phrases "Like a parrot".[44]

Maieutic satire, of necessity, trades breadth of reach for depth of impact, preferring to reach a few individuals receptive to its message rather than compromise and reach the multitudes, which would entail a distortion of the message. According to Kierkegaard, the individual can only attain true Christianity through a direct confrontation with God; the writer who hopes to communicate religious truth must therefore craft their message to fit the individual reader, and in such a way as to not distract the reader with any hint of authorial authority. Kierkegaard's heroes, Socrates and Jesus, willingly made this trade-off between quality and quantity, as did Kierkegaard himself.[45] The Catholic satirists of the midcentury made this same bargain, avoiding the direct communication indicative of both religious preaching like Graham's, and the resurgent realism of postwar fiction. In pursuing indirect communication, O'Brien and Spark became like Kierkegaard's "Secret agents… not only [having] to work continuously, but at the same time labour[ing] to conceal [their] work".[46] Spark and O'Brien echoed Kierkegaard in their creation of a satiric style that combined the unlikely bedfellows of firm moral judgement and a style detached from the typical moral judgements or affective registers of satire, crafting a satire responsive to life in the waning days of Christendom.

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[44] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 155.
[45] Consider, for example, Jesus' discourse on his use of parables in Matthew 13, where he states that he uses parables specifically so that the crowds will not understand him. For a reading of Spark's fiction as akin to parables, see Joan Leonard, "'Loitering with Intent: Muriel Spark's Parabolic Technique," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 65-77.
[46] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 80, 82.

**Tectonic Shifts: Postwar Religion in Britain and Ireland**

*'Do you believe in God?'*
*'Yes.'*
*'Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?'*
*'No, just the ordinary one.'* – From a survey of British religious beliefs[47]

Before analyzing the ways in which Spark and O'Brien enacted their satire at the level of form, it's important to understand the instantiation of Christendom which they confronted in their work. Muriel Spark could not have known, when joining the Roman Catholic Church in 1954 after a brief stopover in Anglicanism, that she was converting to Christianity just before a time of unprecedented upheaval in religion's place in British life. Though a rigorous scholarly debate exists over particulars of scope and causation, most scholars of British religion agree that the 1960s marked a sea change in British religious practice, a cataclysmic drop-off from which institutional Christianity in Britain has never recovered.[48] Usual suspects abound: the sexual revolution, a resurgence of theological modernism, an insurmountable generation gap.[49] Regardless of its causes, this national nosedive in church participation, across all metrics, is all the more startling considering that the immediate aftermath of World War II witnessed a boom in public religion in the country.[50] As we shall see, the drop-off in Ireland was less obvious and

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[47] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1.
[48] For the most gradualist approach to this question, see Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (New York: Longman, 1980). Gilbert emphasizes the long, slow decline of Christianity in Britain over the course of two centuries. On the other end of the spectrum lies Callum Brown, who, though he recognizes earlier downward trends, asserts that "For a thousand years, Christianity penetrated deeply into the lives of the people…Then, really quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organised Christianity on a downward spiral to the margins of social significance" (*The Death of Christian Britain*, 1). Most scholars lie somewhere in the middle of these two approaches. For an even-handed overview of scholarship on the subject, see Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6-30.
[49] For a slightly different take that focuses on the idea of the de-sacralization of public life, especially politics, see Green, *The Passing of Protestant England*, 33-4.
[50] Callum Brown notes that while the immediate post-war period of 1945-1958 saw a huge increase in numbers in key metrics such as church membership, baptisms, and churchgoers receiving Easter Communion, the 60s began a catastrophic decline across all categories, such that by 2000 less than 25% of England's population possessed membership in a church (and under 8% attended services regularly), while fewer than 1/5 of all infants were baptized in the Church of England (*The Death of Christian Britain*, 5, 3). Adrian Hastings records a similar surge of

cataclysmic, but cracks had begun to show in the Catholic foundation of Irish public life, and by century's end Ireland would land in roughly the same space as Britain, with the Catholic Church stripped of its traditional pride of place in Irish life.

Hugh McCleod suggests a sub-periodization he refers to as the "early sixties", lasting from 1958-1962, which preceded the deluge of de-Christianization in the sixties proper, but which hinted at the impending crisis. While, according to McCleod, "Christendom" remained intact in the early sixties, the cracks in its foundation became more visible, with satirists and individualists engaging in a "cautious questioning" of the religious status quo.[51] McCleod's periodization helpfully distinguishes a period of pre-crisis during which Catholic satirists like Spark seemed to sense the coming storm. If we assume that the post-war survival of Christendom was more fragile than it appeared, as even McCleod acknowledges, then the two decades between the end of the war and the beginning of major religious decline mark a period of gradual rotting away, in internal and often invisible ways, of the structures of institutional Christianity in Britain and Ireland. Rowntree and Lavers' major post-war sociological survey, *English Life and Leisure*, confirms the shaky ground on which "Christendom" stood in Britain in this era. The many case studies provided in the book attest to a combination of public acknowledgement of religion, especially the Church of England, paired with a general indifference to its actual content, and a marked distrust of its institutional aspects, especially the clergy.[52]

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interest in Christianity in the years surrounding World War II, extending that interest back to 1935 (auspicious timing for Kierkegaard's entrance on the scene), but notes the startling statistic that "Between 1969 and 1984 the Church of England declared 1,086 churches redundant… In 1976 one church was demolished every nine days" (*A History of English Christianity*, 602).

[51] McCleod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 60.

[52] See B. Seebohm Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1951), 345-8. The book contains a treasure trove of quotes for those interested in the eccentricities of British religious life in the post-war period.

While Ireland saw little of the immediate changes wrought in British religion in the 1960s, remaining a country with a public life heavily dominated by the Catholic Church until at least the 1990s, many of the same tensions could be felt there as in Britain in the post-war period.[53] Church and state remained fairly separate from each other in the wake of the formation of the Irish Republic.[54] Lack of official state power, however, did not keep the Church from playing a significant role in Ireland's public life, especially since Irish education ran largely through parochial schools.[55] No less influential for being indirect, Catholicism's power in Ireland created a curious state of affairs, a religious practice at once private and public. Tom Inglis identifies three major areas where adherence to Catholic practice afforded individuals capital: in the social, political, and economic spheres.[56] Since to defy the church entailed a loss of cultural capital, most Irish Catholics conformed outwardly to the church's demands, even if this practice was "Often a matter of lip service by people going through the motions".[57] The unique Irish blend of private and public religion created an environment where even a committed Catholic like Flann O'Brien might flinch at the particular version of Christianity found in the country, and the prevalence of rote, lifeless religion gave O'Brien's satirical sensibilities plenty of fodder.

In this period of the "early sixties," then – the period in which O'Brien wrote his late novels, and Spark her early ones – both Britain and Ireland experienced an odd mixture of public and private Christianities, where public assent often outstripped private devotion. In Britain, affirmation of Christianity's importance to the nation could quite easily go hand in hand with an

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[53] Tom Inglis does note that Irish Catholicism reached its peak practice in Ireland in the early 1960s, then experienced a slow downturn until the 90s, when the decline sped up (*Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, *Second Edition* [Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998], 18-9). In that way Irish Catholicism could be seen as following a similar trajectory as Christianity in Britain, allowing for a more gradual decline.
[54] See J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland: 1923-1970* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 12-16.
[55] Whyte, *Church and State*, 16-21.
[56] Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, 69-76.
[57] Quoted in Whyte, *Church and State in Ireland*, 7.

utter lack of interest, even strong disbelief, in the particulars of its belief system and in its formal practice, a state Grace Davie has described as "believing without belonging" – where the "believing" itself often amounted to little more than a vague deism and assent to the Golden Rule.[58] In Ireland this religious ambiguity took the form of public adherence to religious practice – fulfilling the obligation to attend Sunday mass, primarily – without a corresponding internalization of religious beliefs and practices. Both these situations imply the existence of what Kierkegaard described as Christendom, the enshrinement of Christianity as a presumed state of being, and part of the presumed being of the State. For Kierkegaard, the Lutheranism of most of his fellow Danes lacked vigor; people assumed they were Christian by virtue of their baptism as infants, and their life in a Lutheran nation, but gave their attention to other pursuits. Kierkegaard's self-appointed task was to sting them out of complacency, toward a choice between wholehearted embrace of Christianity and absolute rejection.[59] O'Brien and Spark's novels in this period aim at similar ends, devoting themselves to excoriating rote religious practice while hinting at a fuller practice of Christianity. While O'Brien tried to sweep away the detritus peculiar to the Irish practice of Roman Catholicism, Spark satirized both the complacent Anglican majority of Britain and the lackluster Catholic minority, who often fail to live up to the standards of the Church. Both authors engage in a sort of *via negativa*, where their satirical depictions of religious practice show the reader what not to do, but only obliquely sketch what they see as the shape of true belief.

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[58] See Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945*, 12-3, 76.

[59] This was the main task of Johannes Climacus, the fictional author of Kierkegaard's summative work, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Climacus, denying that he himself is a Christian, seeks to lay out just how difficult true Christianity is, so that people will not be deluded into thinking they possess it. As he says, "In our own age we seem really to have reached the point that while we are all Christians, it is a very rare thing to find a man who has even as much inwardness as a pagan philosopher. What wonder that one so quickly gets through with Christianity, when one begins by bringing oneself to a state of mind in which it is quite out of the question to get even the slightest impression of Christianity" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 248).

In one sense, it is no spectacular feat to deride religious complacency and hypocrisy, stock targets of satirists throughout the ages. What set O'Brien's and Spark's work apart was the granularity of their critiques; since they recognized the faults endemic to religious practice while remaining religious themselves, they achieved the specificity of caricature that general attacks on religious hypocrisy often miss. Since the Irish religious context differed from the British context, it is no surprise that O'Brien and Spark emphasized different faults, but their critiques shared important similarities. Primarily, both attacked the use of religion as a means of intellectual, social, or emotional security: their ridiculous characters miss the dangerous edge of faith, what Kierkegaard described as life "out over seventy thousand fathoms," because they see religion as a source of security, not challenge. If Christendom entailed, for Kierkegaard, the valuing Christianity as a means to some other end, rather than an end in itself, then O'Brien and Spark bring Kierkegaard's attack upon Christendom into the twentieth century, critiquing the last vestiges of means-to-an-end Christianity as it stood on the cusp of vanishing from British and Irish life.

Though a lifelong practicing Catholic, O'Brien treated religion only glancingly in his early novels, where it acted as backdrop rather than focal point. But *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* examine religion extensively, showing O'Brien's willingness to criticize the excesses of Irish Catholicism while remaining loyal to the church. When O'Brien, offering a retrospective on James Joyce, outlined Joyce's reaction against the stifling forces of Irish Catholicism, he could well have been describing his own life and work: "Rebelling not so much against the Church but against its near-schismatic Irish eccentricities, its pretence that there is only one Commandment, the vulgarity of its edifices, the shallowness and stupidity of many of

its ministers."[60] These conditions surrounding Irish Catholicism had, if anything, intensified in the period after Joyce left Ireland for good, and the 1950s could be seen as their apex, before the thaw that came in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the reforms of which O'Brien heartily approved.[61] Like many Irish writers, O'Brien criticized the staidness of Irish religious culture but, bucking the general trend, he never abandoned the Catholicism of his upbringing;[62] neither did he crusade directly for internal changes to the structure of the Church in Ireland. Instead he engaged in bouts of Kierkegaardian satire, sketching, in dispassionate detail, the vagaries of religious belief drained of its vigor, reduced to rote recitations of catechetical theology and memorized factoids of church history. As he said of *The Dalkey Archive*, his late work represented both a satire on those who would attack religious belief *tout cort*, and a chance to "Chide the Church in certain of its aspects."[63]

The late novels abound with examples of Catholic practice gone bad, from the abusive schooling Finnbar receives from the Christian Brothers in *The Hard Life* – who "Give [him] some idea of what the early Christians went through in the arena by thrashing the life out of [him]"[64] – to the presence of the disappointingly petty spirit of St. Augustine in *The Dalkey Archive*. Much of the satire in the two books focuses on the presence of Jesuit priests, who

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[60] Quoted in Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 174.
[61] See Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His Writings* (Gill and MacMillan: Dublin, 1975), 294.
[62] In an interview, the Irish writer John McGahern argues that Irish Catholicism's anti-intellectualism has created the odd situation where most Irish people remain Catholics, but most Irish writers are lapsed Catholics (*Banned in Ireland: Censorship & the Irish Writer*, ed. Julia Carlson [Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990], 63. Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien speak of a "productive tension" experienced by most Irish writers between their love for certain aspects of Catholicism and their distaste for the institutional church (Introduction to in *Breaking the Mould: Literary Representations of Irish Catholicism*, ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien [Bern: Peter Lang, 2011], 8.
[63] Qtd. in Clissman, *Flann O'Brien*, 294.
[64] Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 510.

exemplify the use of religion as a means to intellectual and material comfort.[65] Both books feature Jesuits in prominent roles, bearing provocative but descriptive names: the German Jesuit Father Kurt Fahrt in *The Hard Life*, who lives up to his moniker through long-winded pontificating, and Father Cobble in *The Dalkey Archive*, who can barely cobble together enough intelligence to perform his duties as priest and religious counselor. Both men ably live up to the Jesuit stereotype of being both nitpicky and materialistic, less concerned with spiritual duties than fleshly comforts. Fahrt spends most of his time away from his brother priests, engaging in flaccid theological discourses with the equally bloviated Mr. Collopy, always over a warming jug of whiskey; though he defends the church absolutely against Collopy's accusations of corruption, he does nothing to live out its teachings. Cobble, meanwhile, fails utterly at his main task of providing spiritual guidance. He does nothing to persuade the mad scientist De Selby to renounce his dangerous experiments, and when confronted with the figure of James Joyce, who disputes his own authorship of smut like *Ulysses* and wishes to join the Jesuits, Father Cobble misunderstands and offers him a job repairing the holes in the Fathers' undergarments. These priests have so accustomed themselves to the order of the world that they retain no inkling of true religious practice. Like the Lutheran pastors of Kierkegaard's Denmark, others forgive them their outbursts of religious language, since such rote words form part of their job description, but they do their best to otherwise conceal the demands of Christian practice.[66]

Through these satirical pokes, O'Brien exposed the dangers of too much deference toward priests, especially educated orders like the Jesuits, a deference that formed one of the foundations of Irish Catholicism.[67] Far from mere anti-clericalism, however, O'Brien's satirical

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[65] For a consideration of the Jesuit order in twentieth century Ireland, see Louis McRedmond, *To the Greater Glory: A History of the Irish Jesuits* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 271-311.
[66] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 174-5.
[67] Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland*, 7-8.

anatomizing of the clergy related to a deeper spiritual problem he sensed in Irish Catholicism: an all or nothing mentality where people either engaged heroically with religion, or scraped by with the bare minimum as they went about their daily lives. O'Brien sensed behind grandiose pretensions to spiritual greatness a longing for life made easy; it is in fact much easier to be religious in a state of heroic isolation than in the muck of everyday life. In *The Hard Life*, Mr. Collopy, who equates religion with social justice, ignores his familial responsibilities to focus obsessively on his crusade to install public women's restrooms in Dublin (a quest that he views as spiritual in nature), going so far as to secure a papal visit to help arrange the details. Mick, the protagonist of *The Dalkey Archive*, contemplates abandoning his girlfriend Mary for life in a religious order, preferably one with a vow of silence for added difficulty. Both novels push against this heroic view of religion, satirizing it by comparing it unfavorably with the simple life of faithful religious practice. Mick, describing the mad scientist and heretic De Selby, claims that ""His ideas quite transcended this earth – this damn earth we're lying on now," to which Mary replies "But about transcending this earth… the simplest priest does that every Sunday."[68] No spiritual or intellectual superheroics required: the faithful repetition of the Mass provides the surest route to transcendence. Mick learns this lesson by novel's end, as he decides to marry Mary after all, despite the fact that she might be pregnant, either by divine miracle or by Mick's unscrupulous best friend. His decision to embrace the absurd as a second Joseph marks Mick as a Kierkegaardian knight of true faith, making the necessary inward leap while remaining outwardly unremarkable. Mick's renunciation of spiritual elitism and embrace of everyday living make him O'Brien's sort of spiritual exemplar, a man willing to embrace the absurdities of belief in the midst of mundane life.

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[68] Ibid, 656.

Likewise, the picture Muriel Spark painted in her early novels of the perils of Christendom underscored the dangers of seeking in religion a source of security. She exposed all sorts of religious practice as a means to an end, from spiritualism that acts as a cover for material greed in *The Bachelors* to the Calvinism of 1930s Edinburgh, utilized primarily to keep social order, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Spark saved her sharpest barbs for her co-religionists, however, perhaps because she saw complacency in the face of the claims of Catholicism most objectionable. Caroline, the convert protagonist of her first novel *The Comforters*, regards her fellow English Catholics with contempt because of their lackadaisical and self-satisfied approaches to their religion. Hearing a fellow convert's description of Catholicism, Caroline is taken aback: "'The wonderful thing about being a Catholic is that it makes life so easy. Everything easy for salvation and you can have a happy life…' He finished there, as if he had filled up the required page of his school exercise book, and need state no more; he lay back in his chair, wiped his glasses, crossed his legs."[69] The idea of Catholicism making life easy appears absurd to Caroline, who (like Spark) has broken off a longstanding affair to conform to the Church's teaching on chastity. Instead, for her Catholicism involves suffering, a pain that strips away the illusion of religion as comfort.

Perhaps Spark's most distilled picture of religion as security comes in the description of the grandmother character in Spark's short story "The Gentile Jewesses": "She believed in the Almighty… She was a member of the Mother's Union of the Church of England. She attended all the social functions of the Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers. This was bright and agreeable as well as being good for business. She never went to church on Sundays, only for special

[69] Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (London: Penguin, 1963), 40. The assessment given of this convert's complacency almost certainly directly echoes this passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals*: "There are many people who reach their conclusions about life like schoolboys; they cheat their master by copying the answer out of a book without having worked out the sum for themselves" (39).

services such as on Remembrance Day."[70] Adherence to the outward, social and national aspects of religion, combined with a baseline belief in a vague sort of deism: this is what Spark detected in the England around her in the "early sixties," and it was this complacent public religion that she ruthlessly anatomized, nowhere more effectively than in *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori*. *The Comforters* is very much the product of a recent convert to Catholicism, full of energy but also skepticism regarding fellow-practitioners, who may not be living the faith with full vigor. The only Catholic Caroline feels any sympathy with is Ernest Manders, the gay uncle of her former lover, who like her has chosen the celibate life after reverting: "She said he was her sort of Catholic, critical but conforming. Ernest always agreed with Caroline that the True Church was awful, though unfortunately, one couldn't deny, true."[71] The ability to be both critical and conforming is the paradoxical active faith that Spark's work embraces yet finds all too uncommon among Catholics.

If *The Comforters* provides several salient examples of complacent living, *Memento Mori* offers a whole smörgåsbord. Every character in the book's cast of elderly upper-class Brits gives a different angle on the problem of complacent living, from Alec Warner's scientific detachment to Percy Mannering's poetic excesses to Geoffrey Colston's stubborn refusal to examine his life. The plot of the book, wherein each character receives phone calls from a mysterious voice who warns them to "Remember you must die," imbues *Memento Mori* with something of the feel of a laboratory, with the reader observing the different reactions elicited by this aural experiment.[72]

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[70] *All the Stories of Muriel Spark*, 283.
[71] Spark, *The Comforters*, 81.
[72] Joan Leonard argues of *Memento Mori* that "More significant, however, than the kind of voice heard by each individual and more important even than the identity of the caller are the distinct reactions to the message… The book… puts forth multiple responses to the haunting question that overshadows it, and it unfolds like a parable with indirectness and open-endedness" ("'Loitering with Intent: Muriel Spark's Parabolic Technique," 70). Elizabeth Anne Weston argues that the unresolvable mystery of the caller's identity opens up a space for contemplation of the actual content of the message ("The Comic Uncanny in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*," *Scottish Literary Review* 9, no. 2 (Autumn-Winter 2017): 117-8).

Mostly these reactions take the form of evasion, a refusal to come to grips with the message itself in favor of obsessing over the incidentals of the calls: what the voice sounds like, who the caller could be, or how the other recipients respond to hearing the voice.

At one extreme stands Mrs. Pettigrew, the vain, greedy housekeeper, who simply blocks the message from her mind entirely: "Mrs. Pettigrew continued to persuade herself she had not heard the anonymous voice on the telephone; it was not a plain ignoring of the incident; she omitted even to keep a mental record of it, but put down the receiver and blacked it out from her life."[73] Mrs. Pettigrew cannot allow anything to disturb her material and psychological comfort, so she blots out any attempts to rouse her from complacency. At the other pole stands Jean Taylor, former maid, who receives no phone calls but endures daily reminders of death, stuck in a gerontology ward. Taylor copes with unpleasant realities through her Catholicism, "Employing her pain to magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidingly upon Death, the first of the Four Last Things to be ever remembered," as the book's final line informs the reader.[74] Like Caroline in *The Comforters*, Jean Taylor uses the suffering of religious belief as a means of staving off complacency. Between these two poles lie a whole range of responses to the painful prick of the memento mori, a panoply of roads better not taken. What the various characters miss in their avoidance of the message is life itself; as the police inspector Mortimer – who shares Jean Taylor's opinion that the phone calls come from Death itself – muses, "Death, when it approaches, ought not take one by surprise. It should be part of the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid."[75] Many characters in Spark's early novels

[73] Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1959), 157.
[74] Ibid, 224.
[75] Ibid, 153.

share this quality of insipidness, and as a result live as if not fully alive. Whatever their stated religious affiliations, their ultimate object of worship remains the material world they inhabit.

**Detachment at Work**

> *My purpose in life would seem to be to present the truth as I discover it in such a way as simultaneously to destroy all possible authority. By ceasing to have authority, by being in the greatest possible degree unreliable in the eyes of man, I present the truth and put them in a contradictory position from which they can only save themselves by making the truth their own. Personality is only ripe when a man has made the truth his own whether it is Balaam's ass speaking or a laughing jack-ass with his loud laugh, an apostle or an angel* – 1843 entry in Kierkegaard's Journal[76]

As they sought to expose the follies of complacency they witnessed in the contemporary practice of Christianity, Spark and O'Brien maintained an ironic distance in their critiques, a distance that might suggest a lack of concern about the religious problems they detected in society, but which rather constituted a method of maneuvering the reader toward an unflinching confrontation with his or her own follies. While the particularities of their detached methods differed, the underlying goal remained the same: to provoke the reader to inward reflection and awareness. For O'Brien, detached satire takes the form of a plain documentary style – too plain even for realism, rather a sort of sub-realism – that favors reported speech with little narratorial comment. Such plainness lets O'Brien's characters expose themselves through their own speech, and corresponding (lack of) actions, while putting the reader through a test of patience. In some sense the critical consensus that finds *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* less appealing than O'Brien's early novels is correct: the late novels cultivate a deliberate difficulty and unpleasantness in their deadpan recording of folly. By withholding any source of aesthetic relief, O'Brien forces the reader to stare, unblinking, at the effects of ethical complacency on the

[76] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 117.

individual. Spark achieves her detachment through another method; if O'Brien utilizes the narratorial eye of the documentary camera, Spark's vision resembles that of a scientist peering through a microscope, looking down and impartially observing the results of her narrative experiments. Critics have sometimes regarded Spark's lack of sympathy for her characters as springing from cruelty, but in reality it has its source in Spark's desire to challenge and develop the reader. Her authorial detachment teaches the reader how to respond to foolish characters – with neither anger nor sentimental pity, but a clear-eyed gaze that recognizes in every fool a reflection of the reader.

**An Astonishing Parade of Nullity: Detachment in Flann O'Brien**

> *An illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed. If it is an illusion that all are Christians – and if there is anything to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by one who vociferously proclaims himself an extraordinary Christian, but by one who, better instructed, is ready to declare that he is not a Christian at all* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*[77]

Flann O'Brien's final two novels pushed to the extreme a comic and satirical technique of absence which long fascinated him. As pseudonym Myles speculated in one of his newspaper columns, "The supreme if somewhat esoteric expression of comicality [is] *not to appear at all*. Just abstraction, blankness, nullity for one day."[78] O'Brien's taste for nullity reaches its apex in the late novels, which O'Brien regarded as his finest – and funniest – books, an opinion which few critics share.[79] Regardless of how humorous these last two novels are, their heightened

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[77] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 24.
[78] Qtd. in Clissman, *Flann O'Brien*, 181.
[79] For O'Brien's assessment of his own work, see Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 211-248. For a representative sampling of critical distaste for the late novels, see Neil Murphy, "Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life* and the Gaze of the Medusa," *Review of Contemporary Literature* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 150; Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, *2nd Edition* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 44; and Carol Taafe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 184-5.

detachment does affect readers through its very lack of affect. As Neil R. Davison argues, the sub-realism of *The Hard Life* helps evoke its target of attack, the complacent bourgeois society of 1950s Ireland.[80] O'Brien himself recognized the satirical and educative potential of the indirect communication of these two novels; like Kierkegaard, he sought to force a confrontation between reader and idea through stepping out of the way and leaving space. Of *The Hard Life* he asserted that "Its apparently pedestrian style is delusive… Everything was done with deliberation, the characters illuminating themselves and others by their outlandish behaviour and preposterous conversations… I deliberately avoided direct narrative on description." He went even farther in his assessment of *The Dalkey Archive*: "*The Dalkey Archive* is not a novel… The book is really an essay in extreme derision of literary attitudes and people and its pervasive fault is its absence of emphasis in certain places, to help the reader."[81] This statement contains an unexplained ambiguity: does O'Brien mean that the book lacks the emphasis that would help readers, or does he mean that the absence itself gives readers the help they require? Whatever O'Brien meant by the assessment, the gaps and absences in *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* put the burden of interpretation on the reader, forcing her or him to untangle the knottiness lying under the apparently simple surface. In O'Brien's late novels, the bland surface disguises a depth of critique, the "pervasive fault" of lack of emphasis becoming an asset prompting greater alertness on the part of the reader.

A main technique O'Brien employs in both novels to create these Kierkegaardian empty spaces is the use of simply presented dialog, without narrative comment, that allows for "The characters illuminating themselves and others… by their preposterous conversations." In other

[80] Neil R. Davison, "'We Are Not a Doctor for the Body': Catholicism, the Female Grotesque, and Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life*," *Literature and Psychology* 45, no. 4 (1999): 31.
[81] Qtd. in Thomas Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 143, and Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 213, 230.

words, O'Brien lets his characters hang themselves with their own rope, carving out space in these brief, compact novels for winding discourses that produce little to no meaning. Tellingly, these conversations tend to be of a theological nature: Mr. Collopy and Father Fahrt joust with each other repeatedly in *The Hard Life*, and the various puffed up characters in *The Dalkey Archive* – De Selby, St. Augustine, Father Cobble, and James Joyce – engage in a series of dialogs where they hash out obscure matters of church history and dogma. O'Brien lets these conversations develop languidly, creating baggy pockets of digression within each novel. What frustrates the reader in these conversations – their meandering pointlessness – is precisely the point. The collective pontificating of these various blowhards forms (to borrow a phrase from *The Third Policeman*) "an astonishing parade of nullity."[82] Apart from subtleties like character names, the books make little comment on the nature of these discourses, instead letting the reader draw his or her own conclusions.[83] Take for example this back and forth between Collopy and Fahrt, where the two start out discussing Collopy's hobby horse of public women's restrooms, then expand into a discourse on suffering and the corruption of the church:

> -- Tell me this, Father. Would you say it's *natural* for a woman to have children?
> -- Provided she is married in a union blessed by the Church – yes… Your catechism will tell you that… Perhaps if a strong hint were dropped [Dublin would install women's restrooms]
> -- *If a hint were dropped*, Mr. Collopy exploded… Well the dear knows I think you are trying to destroy my temper, Father…
> -- Has it ever entered your head, Collopy, that perhaps you are not the most tactful of men?
> -- Tact, is it? Is that the latest? Give me your glass.
> Another pause for decantation and reflection…
> --Damn the thing you know about suffering yourself… Of course you are only spewing out what you were taught in the holy schools. 'By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou mourn.' Oh the grand old Catholic Church has always had great praise for sufferers.

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[82] O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 310.
[83] Compared to the obviousness of Fahrt, Collopy's name is sly, but I think it has at least two reference points. The word "colloquy" means conversation, but originally denoted one of a specifically theological nature, a subtle way to contrast Collopy and Fahrt's deflated dialogs with the great theological discourses of the past. "Collopy" also suggests Calliope, Greek muse of epic poetry, a subtle dig at Collopy's inflated opinion of himself.

> -- That phrase you quoted was inaccurate, Collopy.
> -- Well, am I supposed to be a deacon or a Bible scholar or what?... You have a smart answer for everything. 'Do you believe in the true faith?' 'No.' 'Very well. Eight hundred lashes. If that's the Catholic Church for you, is it any wonder there was a Reformation? Three cheers for Martin Luther!...
> -- Collopy, please remember that you belong to the true fold yourself. That talk is scandalous.
> -- True fold? Do I? And doesn't the Lord Mayor and the other gougers in the City Hall? And look at the way they're behaving – *killing* unfortunate women?... It was our own crowd, those ruffians in Spain and all, who provoked [The Reformation]…
> -- It is not a fact, Collopy. The Reformation was a doctrinal revolt, inspired I have no doubt by Satan. It had nothing to do with human temporal weaknesses in the Papacy or elsewhere…
> -- I'm afraid, Father Fahrt… we are only wasting time and just annoying each other with these arguments. These things have been argued out years ago. You'd imagine we here were like Our Lord disputing with the doctors in the temple. The real question is this: What action can we take? *What can be done?*...
> -- There is one remedy I'm sure you haven't tried, Collopy… *Prayer*…
> -- You can move mountains with prayer, I believe, but I'm not trying to move mountains… [My solution would be] Trams, Father. *Trams*… They would have to be distinctive, painted black all over, preferably, and only one sign up front and rear – just the one word WOMEN… Ah, Father, you don't know how dear to my heart this struggle is and the peace that will come down on top of my head when it is happily ended for ever.[84]

Here, without the aid of narratorial comment, O'Brien paints a clear picture of both men. Fahrt toggles between spouting cliché pieties about the power of prayer and the need to read the catechism, engaging in casuistry by picking at Collopy's minor errors, and taking his Jesuit vow of total obedience to the extreme by dismissing out of hand any hint of the Church's temporal corruption. He would rather ascribe the Reformation to demonic activity than to more obvious, mundane causes. The most damning thing about this portrait of Fahrt, though, is the complacency with which he engages in debate. Even at the points when he might legitimately express anger or other strong emotion, as he rebukes Collopy's supposed errors, he maintains equilibrium, not wanting to spoil the pleasant comforts of hearth and home (and whiskey).

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[84] Ibid, 519-525.

Collopy, while more animated than Fahrt, suffers from the same lack of motivating passion. True, he works himself up regarding his pet issue of women's restrooms, but cannot get beyond a stage-Irish spluttering; he counsels action while doing nothing himself. Even his moment of self-awareness, that his and Fahrt's conversing matters less than action, dissolves into nothing. While Fahrt advises prayer as the answer, Collopy suggests no less miraculous a solution: the installation of a costly and logistically tricky system of bathroom trams.

The voice of Finnbar, the narrator, excuses itself from this long conversation, intervening only three brief times. The interruption included in the passage above is especially telling. After reaching an especially tense moment in the conversation, one in which a real disagreement threatens to break out between the men, or perhaps a real solution hit on, Finnbar records "Another pause for decantation and reflection," a clear sign that, whenever the complacency of their armchair philosophy gets threatened by real action, Collopy and Fahrt circle back around to that saving aid of stupor, the bottle. Even O'Brien's choice of punctuation in these dialogs creates a sense of detachment. Rather than using quotation marks, which give some sense of a personal conversation happening, O'Brien notes the back and forth only through dashes, which impersonalize the debate, giving it a mechanical, recorded feel.

In stepping back to allow his characters free rein to follow their conversational instincts, O'Brien creates a more effective condemnation of their tendencies than direct judgement would allow. Alert readers, put off by the blather, will sort through and reach the proper conclusion themselves: these men are mired in deeply ingrained habits of complacency, their religious educations wasted through lack of useful exercise. O'Brien carried these sorts of conversations over into *The Dalkey Archive*, most famously in the conversation between De Selby and the conjured spirit of St. Augustine, where De Selby seems most interested in discovering whether

Augustine was black, and Augustine focuses mostly on taking petty revenge on fellow saints whom he despises. The clearest example, though, comes when Father Cobble, commissioned by Mick to dissuade De Selby from using his device that might destroy life on earth, instead becomes seduced by the communicative possibilities inherent in De Selby's DMP device. Cobble, attracted by the ease of communicating the Catholic message in an age of mass media, foreswears the traditional hardships of mission work for the ease of the airwaves: "Modern achievements in radio and television, tape recording and all the magic of the cinema have so radically improved communication – *communication*, I repeat – that the old-fashioned preacher going into the wilds is now almost obsolete. Beside the pulpit we may now place the microphone."[85] Like his brother Jesuit Fahrt, Father Cobble speaks largely in clichés ("all the magic of cinema"), rhetorical oddities ("*communication*, I repeat"), and outdated notions of the work of pastoral ministry ("the old-fashioned preacher going into the wilds"). His languid speech exposes Father Cobble as someone attached more to ease and comfort than his priestly duties. At the same time, this presentation hints that Cobble is a man for his time: the book subtly suggests that a blatherer like Cobble finds his natural outlet in mass media, designed as they are to amplify a whole lot of nothing. As in *The Hard Life*, the narrator of *The Dalkey Archive* interrupts these conversations only infrequently, and then only to provide the barest of context. The impetus of judging the follies on display falls squarely on the reader. At every turn, O'Brien presents characters who seek to make the religious life easier, a matter of mere expertise rather than faith. In his distant, detached portrayals of these buffoons, he magnifies their religious torpor to the point of the grotesque, simultaneously making clear that no one should aspire to be

[85] Ibid, 706-7. Father Cobble ends up here a strange sort of ally of Billy Graham.

like them, and that most of us are closer to their behavior than we might be comfortable believing.

O'Brien sustains his focus on contemporary complacency by stripping these two novels of much of the dexterity and experimentation that mark *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. The first-person narrators of those early novels drew the reader in through verbosity and technical skill; even as the books questioned authorial authority, they highlighted the prestidigitational possibilities of literature. *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* forego such expertise; they are, much more pointedly, tales told by idiots. While *The Hard Life* retains first-person narration, the narrator, Finnbar, is one of the least competent, least appealing narrators in the history of fiction.[86] Constantly forgetting or brushing memories aside, he provides the most skeletal of narratives on which to hang his story, and never interjects with strong opinions. His constant mode is deferral:

> That's merely my recollection of the silly sort of conversation we had. Probably it is all wrong… It cannot be truly my impression of [Mr. Collopy] when I first saw him but rather a synthesis of all the thoughts and experiences I had of him over the years… It is seemly, as I have said, to give that explanation but I cannot pretend to have illuminated the situation or made it more reasonable.[87]

Because of Finnbar's constant evasion of narratorial duties, *The Hard Life* relies largely on reported speech and writing: the middle section of the book consists mostly of direct transcriptions of the conversations between Mr. Collopy and Father Fahrt, and the book's climax in Rome gets conveyed indirectly through the letters of Finnbar's brother Manus. At every point O'Brien deters the reader from affective response by filtering information through mediators; even Collopy's death in Rome, which should be a comic highlight (he falls through the floor of

[86] O'Brien had this to say about the narration: "The 'I' narrator, or interlocutor, is himself a complete ass" (Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 213).
[87] O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 502, 505, 508.

an opera house), comes across flattened to the reader, who experiences the event through Manus' recollections after the fact.

*The Dalkey Archive* goes even further to detach the reader from the text by utilizing the first and only third-person narrator of O'Brien's career, the result of a last minute rewrite that suggests O'Brien wanted to further distance his audience from Mick's point of view.[88] Like Finnbar, this unnamed, objective narrator struggles with the basic requirements of the job; the plot comes in fits and starts, and the narrator frequently elides information, at one point dismissing an entire conversation with a hand wave: "The conversation had become desultory, tending to lapse. There was simply nothing to talk about."[89] The narrative "taking away" on display in both novels strips the reader of the aesthetic comforts of O'Brien's more experimental books, and of the familiar affective comforts of the realist novel. Though initially the books seem like realist texts, they are in fact sub-realist, lacking the detailed description characteristic of realism, a trait noticed by many critics.[90] Language fails as a means of conveying what matters in the stories, leaving gaps for the reader to fill in.[91] By coercing the activation of the reader's aesthetic imagination, O'Brien allows also for the catalyzation of the moral imagination; startled by the strange gaps in information and affect, the alert reader slowly recognizes the ethico-religious lack at the center of the novels' characterizations.

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[88] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 229. Cronin claims that the original impetus to rewrite in the third person came from a suggestion he himself gave O'Brien.

[89] O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 692. Carol Taafe notes the lumpenness of the narrative, asserting that "Repeatedly in *The Dalkey Archive* there is this sense of things which don't quite knit together, and its slack pace and narrative looseness are only exacerbated by intrusive attempts to keep the multiple stories in line… O'Nolan's other narrators may tread the line between fiction and reality, they might take a hand in the writing of a novel or question the order of the world, but none had yet forgotten their place so far as to point to the humour itself (or even acknowledge its existence)" (*Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 197).

[90] See Murphy, "Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life* and the Gaze of the Medusa," 153; Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 143; and Davison, "'We Are Not a Doctor for the Body'," 31.

[91] See Murphy, "Flann O'Brien's *The Hard Life* and the Gaze of the Medusa," 152.

## Remember You Must Lie: Sparkian Detachment

> *The majority of authors write so uncharacteristically that almost every man in the Kingdom might have been the author of what is written, and as the name is a meaningless accessory it is easy to see that from a poetic point of view anonymity also has its importance; on the other hand, authors who have an individuality do not need to put their names to their works* – 1839 entry in Kierkegaard's journal[92]

Like O'Brien, Muriel Spark lobs the explosive device of detached satire into the world of her complacent characters. Seeking to provoke both her characters and her readers to action, she lets loose voices that startle her characters out of complacency, while rousing her readers through the detached precision of her satire. By putting her characters beyond the reach of sympathy, Spark unsettles her readers, forcing them to consider the lives on display as mirror images of their own.[93] Just as the characters in *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori* deal with the mysterious voices that surround them, so too readers must discern what lies behind the mysterious narrative voices of Spark's novels, voices that present themselves while simultaneously working for their own erasure. In these voices Spark hits upon a Kierkegaardian method of communicating "like a secret agent," clearing away the detritus of complacency without directly pointing to the answer – a life lived with religious vigor.

Though many of Spark's novels feature some invasion of reality by unknown narrative voices, *The Comforters* and *Memento Mori* literalize this theme. Both books feature characters hearing strange voices, and in both cases the voices act as a catalyst to greater self-awareness – at least for some characters. In *The Comforters*, Caroline Rose suddenly begins to hear a voice

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[92] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 72.

[93] Speaking of Spark's lack of emotion, Ruth Whittaker asserts that "The reader is forced to think instead of feel, to exercise a personal moral intelligence in each case, without explicit guidance from the author" (*The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*, 13). See also Leila Aboulela, "Religious Faith Penetrates the Last Years of Life," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 9 (2018): 1682, where Aboulela argues, with regard to the characters in *Memento Mori*, that "We as readers are invited to share their responses and learn about ourselves." Joseph Hynes goes so far as to assert that "The wonder and pleasure of Spark's fiction reside largely in its luring passive readers into becoming active – indeed, conscious – creators" (Joseph Hynes, *The Art of the Real* [Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988], 15.

narrating her every action, accompanied by the rat-a-tat of a typewriter, suggesting she has fallen prey to some sinister force that has taken control of her life. Though everyone thinks she has lost her grip on reality, she clings to her sanity, intent on resisting the voices: "I refuse to have my thoughts and actions controlled by some unknown, possibly sinister being. I intend to subject him to reason. I happen to be a Christian… I intend to stand aside and see if the novel has any real form apart from this artificial plot. I happen to be a Christian."[94] As her repetition of the phrase "I happen to be a Christian" suggests, Caroline draws strength from her Catholicism – a religion that embraces the possibility of forces beyond human control – and steps up to the challenge of untangling the mystery. The book even suggests that to relent and agree with the prevailing opinion of her madness would be to cave to the complacent pressures of the crowd around her; it is her resistance to the easy explanation that sets Caroline apart.[95] Instead of externalizing the voice by blaming it on a madness beyond her control, Caroline internalizes it by focusing on her response to its presence.

Though the provenance of the voice never becomes clear, its presence does transform Caroline in such a way that she is able to take charge of her life, eventually reconciling herself to reality in the metafictional act of writing a novel about her experiences, a book that replaces her long-gestating critical work *Form in the Modern Novel*. "I'm having difficulty with the chapter on realism,"[96] Caroline admits of her critical work early in *The Comforters*, a sly hint from Spark that realism – both the aesthetic technique and the approach to life that values only material facts

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[94] Spark, *The Comforters*, 105.
[95] After explaining her symptoms to the Baron, a demonological bookseller, he declares her insane, to which Caroline reacts with internal satisfaction: "Caroline felt relieved at these words, although, and in a way because, they confirmed her distress. It was a relief to hear the Baron speak his true mind, it gave her exactly what she had anticipated, what seemed to her a normal person's reaction to her story… Now that she had been more explicit, and had been told she was mad, she felt a perverse satisfaction at the same time as a suffocating sense that she might never communicate the reality of what she had heard" (Ibid, 54-5).
[96] Ibid, 57.

– may be inadequate to understanding the nature of reality and of the self. The mysterious voice, though disruptive, proves transformational precisely in its ability to keep Caroline spiritually "awake"; like the voice of Socrates' daimon, Caroline's narrator keeps her alert and active. The book's fascination with occult forces suggests that Spark believes in the helpfulness of extremes: though diametrically opposed, sincere occultism and sincere Catholicism share a similar advantage over rote religiosity or spiritual indifference – both know the stakes of life. Just as Kierkegaard prefers absolute rejection of Christianity to the admission that it might be true "to a certain degree,"[97] Spark finds more potential for good in the most evil of practices than in the slow slog of indifferent living.

The mysterious caller in *Memento Mori* acts similarly to Caroline's unknown narrator, but he finds his reception more mixed. To those characters like Inspector Mortimer and Charmian Colston who have some grasp on their own mortality, the speaker's message helps prepare them further for their own deaths. The voice even seems satisfied with Charmian's assurance that "For the past thirty years and more I have thought of it from time to time… I do not forget my own death, whenever that will be,"[98] hanging up and not bothering her again with the call: his mission has been accomplished, or rather not needed, since Charmian already exhibits the necessary alertness. Those who do not remember they must die, however, find themselves deeply unsettled by the caller's constant intrusions. Most frightened of all is Dame Lettie, a selfish and self-obsessed woman, who becomes convinced the voice belongs to a criminal planning to rob her. By externalizing the memento mori instead of internalizing its

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[97] "There has been said much that is strange, much that is deplorable, much that is revolting about Christianity; but the most stupid thing ever said about it is, that it is to a certain degree true… Let him be offended, he is still human; let him despair of ever himself becoming a Christian, he is yet perhaps nearer than he believes; let him fight to the last drop of blood for the extermination of Christianity, he is still human – but if he is able here to say: it is true to a certain degree, then he is stupid" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 205).
[98] Spark, *Memento Mori*, 128.

message, Dame Lettie unwittingly hastens her own death – her constant worried chatter about burglars inspire some actual burglars to rob her house, killing her in the process. Here Spark shows the dangerous edge of indirect communication: by remaining hidden, his motives unclear, the messenger leaves each recipient to interpret the message for him or herself, a freedom that often gets abused. At the same time, the hiddenness cannot be removed, because without the unsettling mystery of the speaker's identity, the cast of characters could not be shaken from their complacency at all. Even a bad response like Lettie's is preferable to remaining locked into a complacent life.

An overlooked key to the effectiveness of the voices in both novels is their detachment from the hearers. Not only are both sets of voices unknown to the characters who hear them, they come mediated through technology – Caroline's voices through the typewriter, the caller in *Memento Mori* through the telephone.[99] This disconnect between speaker and voice creates two contradictory sets of responses. Dame Lettie and Geoffrey, in *Memento Mori*, and Caroline's skeptical friends in *The Comforters*, focus on the voice itself: its nature, its origin, even its very existence. This focus on externals prevents them from grasping the point of the messages. On the other hand, the insistence of certain characters – Caroline, Charmian, Inspector Mortimer, and Jean Taylor – of responding to the voices with inward reflection allows them to emerge from their ordeals positively transformed by the recognition that they must practice constant awareness.

Just as the voices within these two novels seek to sting the characters into action, so does Spark's detached narrative voice aim its barbs at the reader. Spark would seem to agree with

[99] For a discussion of technology in Spark, see Amy Woodbury Tease, "Call and Answer: Muriel Spark and Media Culture," *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 70-91. See especially 75-80.

Charmian in *Memento Mori* – a novelist by trade – that "The art of fiction is very like the practise of deception."[100] Using her cold, distant narrative voice as a cover, Spark maneuvers the reader into a position of supposed superiority over her characters, only to force the reader to see his or herself reflected grotesquely on the page.[101] By denying readers the usual affective comforts of fiction, Spark presses them to consider important ideas in a new light.[102] Consider the detached, clinical anatomization of the pious but complacent Sir Edwin Manders, Laurence's father, in *The Comforters*. Viewed from the outside, Edwin is a model of religious devotion, but his arid inner life manifests itself in his inability to live connected to others. As *The Comforters* records it:

> It is possible for a man matured in religion by half a century of punctilious observance, having advanced himself in devotion the slow and exquisite way, trustfully ascending his winding stair, and, to make doubly sure, supplementing his meditations by deep-breathing exercises twice daily, to go into a flat spin when faced with some trouble which does not come within a familiar category. Should this occur, it causes dismay in others. To anyone accustomed to respect the wisdom and control of a contemplative creature, the evidence of his failure to cope with a normal emergency is distressing… But fortunately that situation rarely happens. The common instinct knows how to gauge the limits of a man's sanctity, and anyone who has earned a reputation for piety by prayer, deep breathing and one or two acceptable good works has gained this much for his trouble, that few people bring him any extraordinary problem.[103]

It would be quite simple to feed the reader the appropriate response to Edwin's complacency. He could be painted as an over the top buffoon, concerned only with private trivialities. Given that this description comes directly after his son suffers a near-fatal car accident, anger at his self-

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[100] Spark, *Memento Mori*, 192.
[101] Joseph Hynes, one of the most sensitive readers of Spark, misunderstands on this point when he asserts that the connection to the characters keeps *Memento Mori* from being fundamentally a satire, since he sees in that connection a fostering of empathy for them (*The Art of the Real*, 103-4). It is true that the reader should feel a sense of connection to the characters, but the connection resides entirely in the realm of unpleasant recognition of one's own weaknesses.
[102] As James Bailey argues, Spark's detached techniques "By estranging the reader from the depicted scenario, encourage detached scrutiny rather than immersion" ("Salutary Scars: The 'Disorienting' Fictions of Muriel Spark," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9, no. 1 (March 2015): 36).
[103] Spark, *The Comforters*, 113.

satisfied religiosity would be an equally easy emotion to elicit from the reader. Instead, Spark tamps down any affect to the point of non-existence. First, she distances the reader from Sir Edwin himself. This description begins a new section in the chapter, and it is not until a paragraph after this hypothetical description that the reader realizes the book is talking about Edwin, and not some purely imaginary figure. The long, complex sentences also work as a damper on affect: the halting but precise description of the man "matured in religion" could be pulled from Newman's limpid but complex prose and works to anatomize Edwin's flaws without passing explicit judgement on them. The subtle irony never gets oversold, but comes across in hints: the use of the word "fortunately" to describe the fact that Manders does not have his lifestyle tested by real trial, the addition of "one or two acceptable" as a modifier for his good works – these touches work to delicately expose his outward piety as a fragile cover for a lack of spiritual vigor. By keeping the reader distant from Edwin, preserving him from either pity or anger, Spark forces a slow consideration of Edwin's flaws, a process that makes the reader more alert for signs of his or her own complacency.

Spark's most brutally effective use of distancing works to make strange death itself, as her narrator depicts the murder of Dame Lettie in *Memento Mori*:

> She switched on the light. It was five past two. A man was standing over by her dressing-table, the drawers of which were open and disarranged. He had turned round to face her. Her bedroom door was open. There was a light in the passage and she heard someone else padding along it. She screamed, grabbed her stick, and was attempting to rise from her bed when a man's voice from the passage outside said, 'That's enough, let's go.' The man by the dressing table hesitated nervily for a moment, then swiftly he was by Lettie's side. She opened wide her mouth and her yellow and brown eyes. He wrenched the stick from the old woman's hand and, with the blunt end of it, battered her to death. It was her eighty-first year.[104]

[104] Spark, *Memento Mori*, 183.

The bland attention to externals in this passage crowds out any affective response the reader might have, whether pity, outrage, or the illicit thrill of sensationalism. Short, declarative sentences paint the scene in neutral colors, with all the passion of a police report. Only one word in the entire passage, "Nervily," could possibly relate to the emotions of a character, and even that word choice suggests a physical, chemical response more than an emotional one. Lettie's feelings only get hinted at by her actions – her scream and the opening wide of her mouth and eyes. The actual murder gets described with clinical precision: the reader knows the murder weapon and the exact cause of death but has no access to Lettie's thoughts or emotions as she expires; nor does the description carry with it the catharsis of gore. The refrain-like chant of "It was her eighty-first year" – reminiscent in its spare language of the genealogy found in Genesis chapter five, which recounts the generations that follow Adam, all ending in death – comes in with a thud, cauterizing any emotions, even the barest pity, that readers might feel toward Lettie. The subtle choice of diction – not "She was eighty-one," but "It was her eighty-first year" – adds an extra layer of remove. All that is left is a stark confrontation with the fact of death itself, a totally unromanticized presentation that shocks the reader out of the expected response. We are so used to ignoring death, either by euphemizing it out of existence, or sensationalizing it, Spark suggests, that what is required is a complete, calm exposure to the bare fact of its existence.[105]

In denying her reader the expected release of catharsis, Spark engages in Kierkegaardian communication by showing the difficulty involved in living a religious life, whether that pertains to the material comforts of faith in this life, or the correct attitude toward the next life. For the most part, her detached style works to accomplish the very Kierkegaardian goal of making true

[105] See Weston, "The Comic Uncanny in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*," 120.

faith appear more difficult to attain than most readers think.[106] Like Kierkegaard, her portrayals of Christianity remain primarily negative, showing the many assorted ways in which people can go off path. In part, this may be a recognition by Spark that her mode of fiction (or perhaps any mode of fiction) is ill equipped to directly portray religious belief, a concept she would be familiar with from the *Journals*.[107] Insofar as it tackles questions of religion, then, her fiction primarily concerns itself with the Kierkegaardian act of "taking away," of stripping certainties from the complacent citizens of Christendom. Yet occasionally Spark offers a brief glimpse of what might compel someone to take the leap of conversion, especially her depiction of the persuasive power of a "vision of evil," as theorized in *The Girls of Slender Means*.[108] *The Comforters* offers an oblique glance of this kind, as Caroline's jilted lover Laurence contemplates her news that she has been hearing voices:

> Caroline saw on his face an expression which she remembered having seen before. It was a look of stumped surprise, the look of one who faces an altogether and irrational new experience; a look partly fearful, partly indignant, partly curious, but predominantly joyful. The other occasion on which she had seen this expression on Laurence's face was during an argument, when she had told him of her decision to enter the Church, with the consequence that they must part. They were both distressed; they hardly knew what they were saying. In reply to some remark of Laurence she had rapped out, nastily, 'I love God better than you!' It was then she saw on his face that mixture of surprise and dismay,

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[106] "It is a comfortable kind of reforming which consists in throwing off burdens and making life easier – that is an easy way of getting one's friends to help. True reforming always means to make life more difficult, to lay on burdens; and the true reformer is therefore always put to death as though he were the enemy of mankind…in our times it is obvious that the aspect of Christ which must be stressed is that he is the model… that is the side that must be stressed, for in Lutheranism faith has simply become a fig-leaf behind which people skulk in the most unchristian way" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 298).

[107] "The communication of Christianity must ultimately end in 'bearing witness', the maieutic form can never be final. For truth, from the Christian point of view, does not lie in the subject (as Socrates understood it) but in a revelation which must be proclaimed.

In Christendom the maieutic form can certainly be used, simply because the majority in fact live under the impression that they are Christians. But since Christianity is Christianity the maieuticer must become the witness.

In the end the maieuticer will not be able to bear the responsibility because the indirect method is ultimately rooted in human intelligence, however much it may be sanctified and consecrated by fear and trembling. God becomes too powerful for the maieuticer and so he is the witness, though different from the direct witness in that he has been through the process of becoming one" (Ibid, 259-60).

[108] *Four Novels* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2004), 236.

> somehow revealing in its midst an unconscious alien delight, which she witnessed now once more.[109]

The phrase "an unconscious alien delight," captures Spark's attitude regarding the unconveyable nature of religious belief. Laurence has long since abandoned the Catholicism of his upbringing and finds himself upset that Caroline's conversion means the end of their relationship. Yet in the moment of confrontation with a religious conviction – Caroline's own reminder to Laurence that "Against God we are always in the wrong"[110] – Laurence experiences a surprisingly complex affective response, his shock and disappointment leavened by a joy that seems to come from true recognition. Even as he knows he must lose Caroline, he senses that for the first time her intense conviction has been channeled into something worthy of it. Having experienced at home a less vibrant faith, Laurence finds himself taken aback by belief with the force of conviction behind it. The reader too gets invited to share in this mixture of shock and joy as he or she recognizes in Laurence's own response of "surprise and dismay" – and in Spark's detached presentation of such complicated emotions – a complex of emotions that both unsettles and opens the individual to new experiences.

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[109] Spark, *The Comforters*, 68-9.
[110] Taken from the title of the sermon that ends *Either/Or*, "The Edifying in the Thought That Against God We Are Always in the Wrong."

## Rejecting the Comforters: Resituating O'Brien and Spark

> *A literary attack… constitutes no infringement upon the personal freedom of an author… But an expression of approval is by no means so innocuous. The critical judgment which excludes a writer from the realm of literature does not limit his sphere of action; but the criticism which assigns him a definite place within, may well be cause for apprehension… To speak dialectically, it is not the negative which constitutes an encroachment, but the positive* – Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*[111]

*The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*, which followed a twenty year silence in Flann O'Brien's career (minus the *Irish Times* columns and the Irish language novel *An Beal Bocht*, both written under the Myles pseudonym), often get treated as the black sheep of his oeuvre, disappointing excursions into mundanity after the stratospheric flights of fancy of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*.[112] Because of the commercial failure of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and O'Brien's inability to find a publisher for *The Third Policeman*, and the fact that *The Dalkey Archive* recycled many characters and plot points from that unpublished work in a different style and tone, critics see these later books as attempts to compromise artistic integrity for wider readership. This critical attitude has if anything increased in the past two decades in the wake of the claiming of O'Brien as a postmodernist, a stance forwarded most vocally by Keith Hopper.[113] Even critics who champion the later books, like Thomas F. Shea, tend to do so in an attempt to argue for their status as postmodern texts.[114] In painting O'Brien as a postmodern author, however, critics fail to recognize the tensions within O'Brien's work between form and content: while O'Brien's aesthetics were experimental, perhaps even avant-garde, the authorial stance

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[111] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 5.
[112] Hugh Kenner, never one to mince words, dismisses O'Brien's entire career after the first two books as "Ruin… So much promise has seldom accomplished so little" (*A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983], 255). Carol Taafe explicitly argues for their failure as conventional novels: "Their repetition of earlier comic material, and their lacklustre commitment to the novelistic conventions which his experimental novels had joyfully unpicked, betray a fairly crippled consistency" (*Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, 184).
[113] Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 1-22.
[114] Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, 142. A welcome exception to this can be found in Donohue, *The Writer as Self-Evident Sham*.

underneath was more static than critics like Hopper allow. Hopper's insistence that O'Brien's best work creates "An impossible flux of shifting perspectives which clash and interact unpredictably… so as to never rest on any one 'true' meaning… [such that] the centrality of authorship is undermined and reconstructed" works well as a generic statement of postmodern aesthetics, but it hardly fits as a descriptor for O'Brien's novels, which maintain an ethical and intellectual rigidity under their mellifluous aesthetic surfaces.[115] The books are, as Hopper rightly notes, dialectic, but they neither build toward a Hegelian synthesis, nor dissolve into deconstruction; rather, their dialectic exposes the follies of complacency and pushes the reader toward a Kierkegaardian moment of self-examination and choice. In other words, O'Brien's aesthetic playfulness does not negate his staunchly held Catholicism; rather it complements O'Brien's underlying beliefs by encouraging the reader to reach similar conclusions without direct guidance.

While *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* fit uneasily into the category of the postmodern, neither do they represent a repudiation of experimentation in favor of realism. Understanding them as Kierkegaardian texts – simultaneously distant, ironic novels, and ones deeply invested in ethico-religious concerns – reveals them as products of an aesthetic shift by O'Brien toward a satirical form better suited for contemporary cultural critique than the ludic multiplicity of *At Swim-Two-Birds* or the feverish nightmares of *The Third Policeman*.[116] As Flann O'Brien the author recedes in prominence through a disavowal of verbal pyrotechnics, the

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[115] Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*, 30-1. Alana Gillespie likewise argues that "Authority in O'Nolan's work is never stable or a given, but a flexible construct" ("In Defence of 'Gap-Worded' Stories: Brian O'Nolan on Authority, Reading and Writing," in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, 204).

[116] The fact that *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* remain rooted in their particular place and time also helps explain why they have never attained the popularity of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*. Though all of O'Brien's novels are unmistakably Irish, his first two novels have broader, more universal concerns than his final two novels.

novels open up space to work maieutically on the reader. In other words, while readers finish *At Swim-Two-Birds* impressed by the dexterity of the author, they close *The Hard Life* focused more on the unsettling picture of Irish religious and social life it presents. What some scholars have identified as a postmodern or Menippean strain in O'Brien that seeks to undermine authority is in fact closer to a Kierkegaardian distrust of life-mastery that would substitute mechanical systems for organic life, rote learning for direct experience. In *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive* O'Brien uses detachment to ridicule four areas of potential mastery – scientific, political, religious, and aesthetic – while subtly advocating for an approach to life grounded instead in the risk of faith.

Like O'Brien, Spark has often been pegged as a forerunner of postmodern fiction. Unlike O'Brien, however, whose deeply ingrained Catholicism has largely gone overlooked, Spark has been the subject of a critical tug of war between those who would claim her as a postmodernist and those who see her as a prime exemplar of the Catholic novelist.[117] As with O'Brien, the crux

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[117] Bryan Cheyette has been among the most vocal in the postmodern camp, arguing for Spark's "Playful and anarchic fiction, which disrupts the certainties of her supposedly stable identity as a 'Catholic writer'… [her novels make clear] the unresolved tension between her conversion to Catholicism and her conversion to the art of fiction" (*Muriel Spark* [Devon: Northcote House Publishers, 2000], xi, 23). The other most important source for this argument in the last twenty years comes in the essay collection *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). In his introduction to this collection, McQuillan criticizes the Catholic critical understanding of Spark on the grounds that "Everything which might be interesting… is squeezed out… in the name of a Catholic doctrinal, orthodoxy which is nowhere present… and is constantly subverted" (Introduction to *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, 2-3). He goes on to argue that all writing is anti-theological, since it aims to undermine stable meanings (4). Cheyette's essay in this collection again refutes the idea that her conversion entailed any sort of stable commitment to Catholicism, arguing that "It is clear that the intelligence and subversiveness of her fiction is driven not by an unchanging morality but by a radical singularity" (Bryan Cheyette, "Writing against Conversion: Muriel Spark the Gentile Jewess," in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan [Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002], 95). Ironically, McQuillan's interview with Spark that concludes the collection includes quotes from the author that seem to directly undermine his and Cheyette's positions: "[Critics describe her as] postmodernist, mostly, whatever that means… I am a Catholic and I'm a believing Catholic. I do adhere to the Catholic doctrines… They are bound to colour my narrative, inform my narrative approach" (McQuillan, Martin, "'The Same Informed Air,'" 216-7). Cheyette and McQuillan are reacting against a previous generation of scholarship that sought too easy connections between Spark's Catholicism and her novels. See especially Jennifer Lynn Randisi, *On Her Way Rejoicing: The Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), and Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark*. In turn, critics have responded to Cheyette and McQuillan, attempting to restore Catholicism to a central place in her authorship while presenting a more complicated picture than Whittaker and

of this critical confusion lies in the tension between form and content – Spark's orthodox Catholicism striking critics as an odd fit with her distinctive aesthetic. Viewed through a Kierkegaardian lens, however, the marriage makes perfect sense. Catholicism underlies Spark's writing, but she cannot (and would not if she could) express what she sees as its truth directly. For her, Catholicism acts as the understated norm from which her characters depart into all sorts of folly and meanness. Satire and irony are her forms of indirect communication, her characters the models of a complacency that must be avoided.

Marina MacKay has helpfully laid out the problems that emerge when critics try to taxonomize Spark as either a realist or a postmodernist; MacKay also argues for the need to read Spark in her historical moment, a need often overlooked in the rush to meditate on Spark's ontological interests.[118] These concerns apply just as easily to O'Brien's novels as to Spark's. Understanding the importance of Kierkegaardian indirect communication in their satires provides a way out of these false critical dichotomies.[119] The marrying of aesthetic complexity with ethico-religious stability in these maieutic satires suggests a third way between postmodernism

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Randisi. Helena M. Tomko, for example, argues that in her novels "Spark tries less to unsettle the doctrinal norms of the Catholic Church than the literary norms of the new but formidable canon of early twentieth-century Catholic fiction… Her fiction betrays her obvious discomfort with the self-enclosure of secular realist fictions but no less with the corrective spiritual authority assumed in the classic Catholic novel. This aesthetic paradox undergirds *The Girls of Slender Means*, thus placing the problem of a Catholic literary aesthetic at its thematic heart" (Tomko, "Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* at the Limits of the Catholic Novel," 43, 47). Thomas F. Haddox sees Spark's style as an attempt to create a Catholicism "for really intelligent people," one that focuses on the aesthetic and intellectual appeal of the church (*Hard Sayings: The Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy in Late Modern Fiction* [Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013], 50-84). One of the most balanced recent treatments of religion in Spark's work comes from Gerald Carruthers, who defends the importance of religion in her novels but also argues that "The religious instinct rather than any religious certainty" is what matters most for Spark ("Muriel Spark as Catholic Novelist," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010], 76).

[118] "Muriel Spark and the Meaning of Treason," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 506-7.

[119] Unsurprisingly, Kierkegaard too found himself claimed by deconstructionists at the height of high theory. See especially the essays in *Kierkegaard and Literature: Irony, Repetition, and Criticism*, ed. Ronald Schleifer and Robert Markley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984). More recent work has sought to reestablish the historical context of Kierkegaard's aesthetic authorship. See Jon Stewart, *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen, and Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2015), 195-209; see also George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 50-71, 116-136.

and realism, a style of fiction that hybridizes postmodernism's playful spirit with the social consciousness of realism. Recognizing the spirit of late Christendom in which Spark and O'Brien wrote their novels of the "early sixties," meanwhile, grounds the religious content of these novels as much in historical as in ontological pressures. Surveying the complacency around them, Spark and O'Brien found in detachment the means to provoke the individual reader to greater religious self-awareness, a unique Kierkegaardian inheritance perfectly suited to their chosen roles as religious provocateurs outside the complacent mainstream.

# Chapter 3: On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle – W.H. Auden, R.S. Thomas, and the Vocation of Poetry

> *In our age what is an author? An author is often merely an x, even when his name is signed, something quite impersonal, which addresses itself abstractly, by the aid of printing, to thousands and thousands, while remaining itself unseen and unknown, living a life as hidden, as anonymous, as it is possible for a life to be, in order, presumably, not to reveal the too obvious and striking contradiction between the prodigious means of communication employed and the fact that the author is only a single individual* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*.[1]

Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" presents the scholar of British literature with an almost irresistible interpretive temptation. The poem, which recounts the speaker's presence in an empty country church while reflecting more broadly on the lingering ghost of traditional religion in Britain, bottles in its lines a whole attitude toward religious practice – and its confluence with literary production – in midcentury Britain. Larkin's tone of unfamiliarity mixed with vague nostalgia flows through his assessment of the church:

> some brass and stuff
> Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
> And a tense musty unignorable silence
> Brewed God knows how long…
>
> Mounting the lectern I peruse a few
> hectoring large-scale verses and pronounce
> Here endeth much more loudly than I'd meant
> The echoes snigger briefly…
> I… Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.
>
> Yet stop I did: in fact I often do
> And always end much at a loss like this
> Wondering what to look for; wondering too
> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into…
>
> But superstition like belief must die

[1] Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Point of View, Etc.*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 45.

And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass weedy pavement brambles buttress sky…

though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet
Are recognised and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious
And gravitating with it to this ground
Which he once heard was proper to grow wise in
If only that so many dead lie round.[2]

The speaker experiences a strange mixture of bewilderment and allurement. His alienation comes across in Larkin's mixture of vague description ("some brass and stuff") with self-consciously high diction ("accoutered frowsty barn"). On top of this, the speaker presents the work of the church as faded and passing, his declaration "Here endeth" signaling not merely the end of the scripture lesson, but of a whole way of life.[3] Despite his distance from the religion that had actually been practiced in the church, however, the speaker retains a sort of nostalgia for this "serious house on serious earth." Larkin's speaker believes that the church will continue as a significant marker of human production, "If only that so many dead lie round." The poem thus presents British religion as surviving spectrally – stripped of real belief and practice but maintaining some slight grip on the emotions and imagination of those who stumble upon its remnants.

Larkin's poem presents powerful images of half-regretted disbelief, and his tone of unfamiliarity mixed with regret taps into a certain vein of midcentury attitudes toward religion.

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[2] Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 34-5.
[3] This sense of permanent loss is apparent in the poem's title, as Larkin splits the gerund "Churchgoing" into a noun and verb phrase to suggest the passing away of religion.

There is a danger, however, in taking "Church Going" as *the* literary representation of midcentury religious decline.[4] For one thing, though the sense of disconnection from Christianity Larkin captures continued to grow at midcentury, it had not yet become the dominant religious attitude among the British public, and religious practice remained highly contested in 1954, the year of the poem's composition. Second, Larkin's poem rests on an unstated assumption of temporal separation: while the religious lie in graves around him, the poet remains very much alive, and able to voice the thoughts of many. Poetry has, in this account, if not replaced religion, at least overtaken it, recording its decline along the way. But Larkin's image of a space where "so many dead lie round" might just as easily describe Poet's Corner as an anonymous country church; whatever Arnoldian hopes for literature's ascendancy poets like Larkin might have clung to in the midcentury, on the ground poetry's position in British public life was at least as tenuous as that of the Anglican church.[5]

For some poets of the midcentury, especially those with religious affiliations, this connection between poetic and religious fortunes did not go unnoticed. As Raymond Williams has warned, there is a vanishing horizon regarding utopian ideals like the idyllic countryside, with each generation longing for the one before it, back into an Edenic past.[6] This same danger applies to other aspects of British culture, be it the myth of a truly Anglican England or the

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[4] Nigel Alderman observes that "Church Going" "Quickly turned into a set-piece poem that came to represent not just [the] empirical turn, but also the decline of Christianity in postwar Britain" ("Impossible Elegies: Poetry in Transition 1940-1960," in *British Literature in Transition: 1940-1960 – Postwar*, ed. Gill Plain [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 60). For one such reading, see Lewis, Pericles, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 1-5. Lewis does acknowledge that Larkin's poem is more predictive than descriptive, noting the post-war religious boom in Britain, but he still takes the poem as a semi-confident attempt at an Arnoldian replacement of religion with poetry.

[5] At times, at least, Larkin seemed oblivious to poetry's tentative situation; as he said in a 1956 magazine profile, he thought poetry "Should keep the child from its television set and the old man from his pub" (Qtd. in Charles Tomlinson, "The Middlebrow Muse," *Essays in Criticism* VII, no. 2, (April 1, 1957): 209.

[6] *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 9-12.

dream of a time when poetry truly mattered.[7] Still, whether the feelings that Christianity and poetry alike faced a crisis in the midcentury hinged on a real or imagined crisis, these feelings catalyzed a strong response among Christian poets. The dissolution of Christianity as a public force, if not directly connected to poetry's decline in public importance, at least ran parallel to it in the minds of these poets, since both declines could be traced to the rise of an indifferent public fed on mass media.

Amidst these dual pressures, two of the most important Christian poets of the midcentury turned to the work of Kierkegaard as a resource for navigating the shrinking public significance of their art and their religious beliefs. Despite differences in station, style, and philosophy, W.H. Auden and R.S. Thomas both utilized Kierkegaardian ideas extensively as they sought a firm foothold for religious poets in a rapidly changing era.[8] At critical points in their poetic careers – Auden in the 1940s and 50s, as his style became more elusive and comic in the wake of his move

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[7] See, for example, the rigorous scholarly debate surrounding the origins of religious decline in Britain discussed in Chapter Two.

[8] Both Auden and Thomas engaged with Kierkegaard's works over almost the entire span of their working lives. Auden discovered Kierkegaard near the beginning of Kierkegaard's life in English, having been introduced to his work by Charles Williams, whose own influence on Auden's reversion to Anglicanism was huge. Auden began to read Kierkegaard deeply and broadly in the 1940s, expressing both in public and private a grasp on nearly all of Kierkegaard's works in English. By the mid-1950s Auden had begun to cool on Kierkegaard somewhat, noting in 1956 what he saw as Kierkegaard's great limitation – an inability to recognize the worth of material goods (see "Contribution to *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*" in W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden – Prose Volume III: 1949-1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011] 573-80). This dissatisfaction would culminate in a 1968 essay, "A Knight of Doleful Countenance," in which Auden would accuse Kierkegaard of de facto Manichaeism (W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden – Prose Volume V – 1963-1968*, ed. Edward Mendelson [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015], 361-373). Even in this essay, however, his admiration of Kierkegaard remains. That he acknowledged his debt to Kierkegaard till the end of his life is shown in one of his final poems, "A Thanksgiving," where Kierkegaard is included among a litany of the most important influences in Auden's work, without whom "I couldn't have managed/even my weakest of lines" (Auden. W.H., *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson [New York: Vintage, 1991], 892). Thomas likewise was an early adopter of Kierkegaard, having started reading him at the beginning of his priestly ministry in the 1940s. He began to engage with Kierkegaard via poetry in the 1960s, and wrote a series of poems over the next forty years that reference Kierkegaard explicitly. Like Auden, he had mixed feelings about Kierkegaard's thought – he accused Kierkegaard of being anti-poetry, a charge we will explore below, but to the end of his life he saw Kierkegaard's work as a guiding light, and continued to reread his works. See "R.S. Thomas Talks to J.B. Lethbridge," *Anglo-Welsh Review* 74 (1983): 36-56, especially 51, 54-5; Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went into the West: The Life of R.S. Thomas* (London: Aurum Press, 2006), 30; and John Ormond, "R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet," *Poetry Wales* 7, no. 4 (1973): 52-3.

to America and his reembrace of Christianity, Thomas in the 1960s and 70s as he moved from writing poems primarily in a Welsh pastoral mode to his mature poetry of religious questioning – these two poets found a fellow traveler in the Danish philosopher, one who would shape not just their thought, but also their poetics. Kierkegaard's concepts of literary audience and vocation especially appealed to Auden and Thomas. Theorizing the existence of an abstract, indifferent Public, Kierkegaard advocated for literature that would communicate at the level of the individual reader, a call picked up on by both Auden and Thomas. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic "genius" and the religious "apostle" represented an anti-Romantic conception of the artist, giving a reduced importance to the act of aesthetic creation; though this stance may seem unattractive to poets, it was seized by Auden especially as a means of securing a modest but stable role for the poet in society.[9] Finally, Kierkegaard's intuition that true communication aimed primarily toward silence manifested itself in the poetry of both Auden and Thomas, albeit in opposite ways. In a sense, the two poets took radically different paths to the same destination; while Thomas fostered a sense of silence in his late poetry through a radical simplification of diction, syntax, and verse form, Auden used verbal excess and circumlocution in his late poetry as a means of hinting at the failure of language, his sense that "truth, in any serious sense,/Like orthodoxy is a reticence".[10] While critics have written voluminously about these mid-career changes in style in both Auden and Thomas, and have likewise commented extensively on their reading of Kierkegaard, no one has yet connected the two together, to show that the aesthetic changes in the poems of both men came about, at least in part, through an adoption of Kierkegaardian ideas of communication and vocation.[11] By reading

[9] Thomas' relation to this idea is more complex and will be explored below.
[10] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 621.
[11] Though Brian Conniff comes close, linking Auden's crisis of vocation to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, himself a reader of Kierkegaard ("Auden, Niebuhr, and the Vocation of Poetry," *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 3 [Autumn

key late poems of Auden's (including his pivotal long poem *The Sea and the Mirror*) and Thomas's (including those specifically centered around Kierkegaard) as examples of Kierkegaardian indirect communication, I show how maieutic literature – that which aims at developing individual religious consciousness – proved an attractive option for these poets as they navigated shifts in both the religious and poetic landscapes of midcentury Britain and America, helping them avoid both the secular turn of Movement poets like Larkin and the embrace of mythology present in some midcentury Christian poets.[12]

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1993]: 45-65. Critics have long recognized the intellectual debt both men owe to Kierkegaard. For Auden's connection to Kierkegaard, see, for example, Edward Callan, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 163-217; Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden: A Critical Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 454-464, 471-6; Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 50-82; and Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 84-107. Auden critics have tended to downplay Kierkegaard's stylistic importance for Auden, following John Fuller's declaration, in regard to "New Year Letter," that "Kierkegaard's categories should be taken, not as a hidden key to the work, but as a parallel expression of ideas that have already deeply influenced the argument" (*A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970], 135; and Justin Replogle's assertion that it was Auden's temperament that eventually drove him to embrace Kierkegaard as confirmation of already existing ideas (*Auden's Poetry*, 148-9). For Thomas and Kierkegaard, see William V. Davis, *R.S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 123-42; Timothy Saunders, "Peripheries of Space, Self and Literary Style in R.S. Thomas's Readings of Søren Kierkegaard," *Scandinavica* 56, no. 1 (2017): 59-95; and Rowan Williams, "Suspending the Ethical: R.S. Thomas and Kierkegaard," in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 206-219.

[12] Nigel Alderman asserts that "Poets of this so-called religious turn often critique secular modernity by attempting to imagine or locate the survival of mythic rites whose performance unites the individual and the collective, and for which the writing and reading of the poem itself stands as an attenuated, archetypal ritual" ("Impossible Elegies," 61). As I will show, neither aspect of this "mythological" embrace applies to Auden or Thomas, who specifically sought poetry grounded in the present struggle of religious faith, and who – in the case of Auden especially – distrusted the idea of poetry as any form of or substitute for religion.

## Poetic Decline at Midcentury

> *It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning* – T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets"[13]

How do you gauge the impact of poetry on culture? By some measures, Anglo-American poetry found itself in a more secure position than ever before by the end of the twentieth century; with creative writing ensconced in academic departments, poets found themselves able to earn livings in fields adjacent to their poetic work, while the expansion of publishing ventures meant that many poets' debut collections might outsell, in terms of raw copies, the initial printings of canonical works like Eliot's *The Waste Land*.[14] Still, by many other indications poetry no longer captured the imagination of the public – however narrowly defined – as it had during the heights of modernism; the decline of poems printed in newspapers and magazines, and the death of the radio poetry program suggested a displacing of poetry from public life.[15] The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a flurry of articles and books that attempted to diagnose the death throes of public poetry, most famously those penned by Joseph Epstein and Dana Gioia.[16] These jeremiads

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[13] Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 381.

[14] See Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture: 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 10-14 for an optimistic take on the state of contemporary American poetry in comparison to the modernist period. See also Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 1-36. Much of the scholarly literature surrounding this topic focuses on the American context – not irrelevant here, since Auden found himself writing in this context after 1940. For good overviews of British poetry in this period, see Alderman, "Impossible Elegies," 52-67, and Hannah Brooks-Motl, "Reading Poetry from The Group to the British Poetry Revival," in *British Literature in Transition: 1960-1980 – Flower Power*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 50-64 – see especially 53-7 for a good discussion of the institutional context of this poetry, as more college students became interested in creative writing, and funding from philanthropic organizations increased.

[15] See John Spaulding, "Poetry and the Media: The Decline of Popular Poetry," *Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 147-153.

[16] Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *Commentary* 86, no. 2 (August 1988): 13-20, and Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" *The Atlantic* May 1991. For a more academic counterpart to these works, see Christopher Clausen, *The*

placed much of the blame on poetry itself, accusing the field of sequestering itself behind layers of solipsism and difficulty, with little to attract the average reader.

Laying aside the question of the justice of these invectives, it is worth noting that they largely recapitulated an earlier generation of critiques. Already in the 1940s, critics such as Edmund Wilson, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell sensed poetry's declining presence in public life.[17] In their critiques, Wilson, Schwartz, and Jarrell intuited the radical shift overtaking poetry in the midcentury, a shift Evan Kindley has recently identified as a movement from the poet as recipient of aristocratic patronage to the poet-critic as a bureaucratic official.[18] The major difference between the critiques of these earlier critics and those of Epstein and Gioia is where they placed the blame; while Epstein and Gioia pointed the finger firmly at poets themselves, these earlier critics viewed tectonic shifts in the underlying culture as the real culprit. As Jarrell put it, "Both [poetic difficulty and public indifference] are no more than effects of that long-continued, world-overturning cultural and social revolution… which has made the poet difficult and the public unused to any poetry exactly as it has made poet and public divorce their wives, stay away from church… or do a hundred thousand other things, some bad, some good, and some indifferent."[19] To critics of the immediate post-war period, poetry's decline could only be understood as a thread in a bigger tapestry, that of the radical changing of society itself in an age of technology and mass culture.

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*Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981), especially 30, 83-4, 118-122.

[17] See Edmund Wilson, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" in *The Triple Thinkers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 15-30; Delmore Schwartz, *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), esp. 3-23; and Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 3-25.

[18] *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1-16.

[19] *Poetry and the Age*, 4. Schwartz agrees: "It is not a simple matter of the poet lacking an audience, for that is an effect, rather than a cause, of the character of modern poetry… The fundamental isolation of the modern poet began not with the poet and his way of life; but rather with the whole way of life of modern society" (*Selected Essays* 7).

In the wake of his infamous migration to the United States, and subsequent reversion to the Anglican faith of his childhood, W.H. Auden found himself musing over many of the same questions regarding poetry's place in the public sphere. His critical writings of the 1940s and 50s are replete with reflections on the rise of mass culture, and what place (if any) the artist – especially the poet – might find within that culture. Among the various ideas he floats in these essays, one of the most salient is his distinction between highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow art. According to Auden's account, in most human societies there has existed a divide between highbrow art and "popular" or lowbrow art. For Auden "lowbrow" should not be taken as an insult; it merely refers to the art preferred by most of society. For Auden, the real problem lies in the middle. Both highbrow and lowbrow art defy the managerial, suffocating tendencies of bureaucratic culture; the avant-garde painting and the peasant song alike resist commercialization and standardization. Middlebrow cultural production, however, embraces these aspects of modern life, hoping to gain the prestige of the highbrow using only the effort of the low.[20] In his discussions of high, middle, and lowbrow culture, Auden tapped into a common cultural anxiety of the war and post-war period, especially in his adopted home of the United States (see Figure 1).[21] At the same time, he offered a way out of what he saw as the predicament

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[20] One of Auden's favorite images of the high/low divide comes from *The Magic Flute*, where the hero Tamino undergoes many trials in order to win Pamina, the heroine – he is the highbrow – while his underling Papageno refuses to be tested, but because of his self-awareness still receives a (lesser) prize: his mate Papagena, thus gaining the reward of the lowbrow. As he describes it in his unpublished 1943 essay "Vocation and Society": "To all of us the gods offer a similar choice between two kinds of existence, between remaining Papageno the lowbrow, and becoming Tamino the highbrow. What they permit none of us, is to be a middlebrow, that is, to exist without passion and without a willingness to suffer. For the middlebrow wishes to have his cake and eat it. He is not willing to be nobody in particular… on the other hand, he does not wish to become wise, only to be wise, to graduate *cum laude*" (*The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume II – 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002], 176).

[21] This infographic from *Life* magazine derived from the work of *Harper's* editor Russell Lynes, who wrote in order to defend the middlebrow and satirize those who would cling to the highbrow. For an overview of the development of middlebrow culture, see Joan Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xi-xx. Perhaps the most famous critique of American culture in this period came from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed., Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott [Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002], 94-136). Not all trenchant critiques came from exiles,

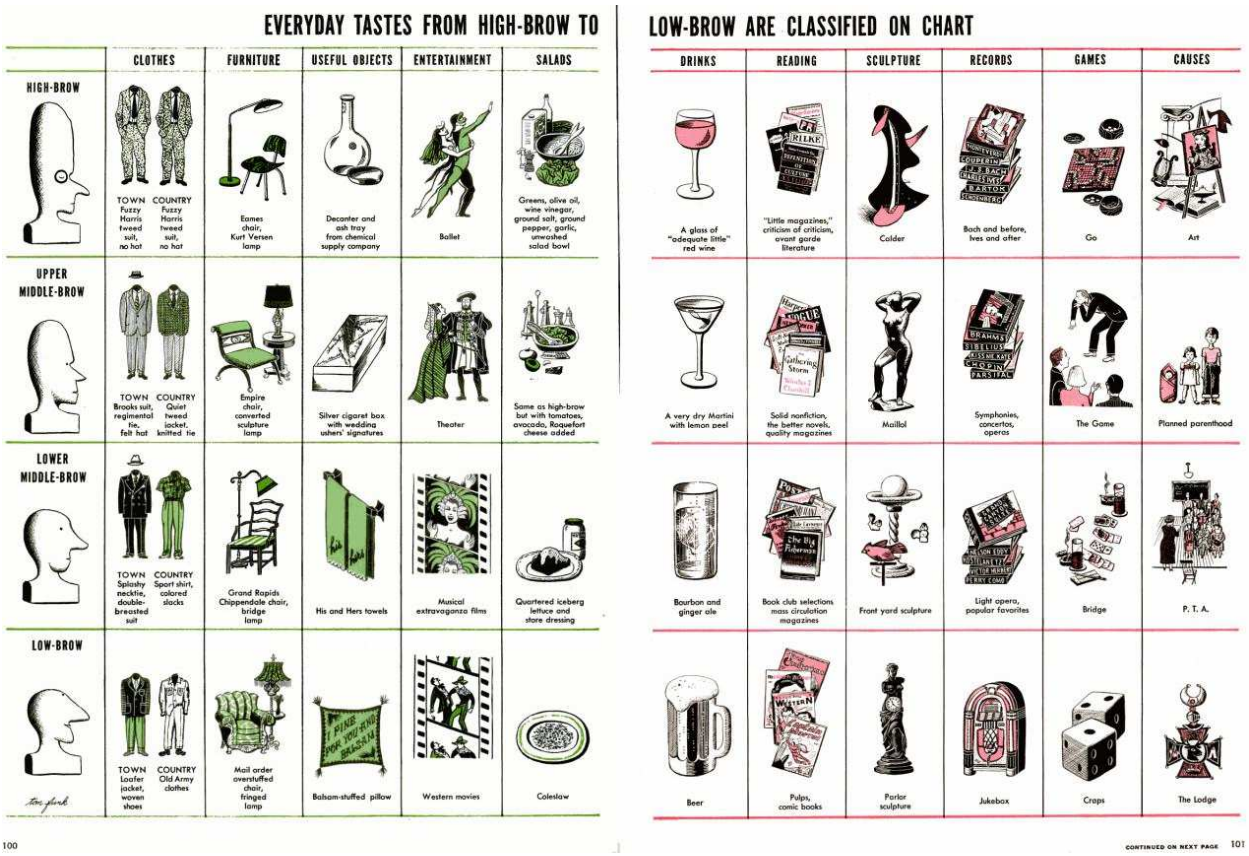


Figure 1. Infographic from a 1949 issue of *Life Magazine*.

of modern culture, an escape route – originally theorized by Kierkegaard – which poetry might help facilitate.

In the essay "The Poet & the City," from Auden's best-known work of non-fiction, *The Dyer's Hand*, he explicitly ties these notions of highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow to the idea

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however. One of the most penetrating, Dwight Macdonald's 1960 essay "Masscult and Midcult," develops a theory of culture parallel to Auden's, where High Art stands in contrast to Masscult – the mass produced entertainment of the new media, and Midcult, a form that stands between the two, sinister in its ability to mimic High Art without achieving its actual excellence (Macdonald's running example of midcult is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*). See Dwight Macdonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), 3-75. Though Americans seemed most preoccupied with these divisions between "brows", the British also had a fascination with the concepts in this period. Virginia Woolf wrote against the middlebrow in her essay of that name ("Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942], 176-86). Charles Tomlinson titled his polemic against the poets of The Movement "The Middlebrow Muse," attacking figures like Larkin and Amis in almost Audenesque terms: "For a movement in writing which purports anti-romanticism there is at work an unconscionable amount of self-regard, of acting up to one's mirror image of one's self. I know of no surer measure of the lack of genuineness in art" ("The Middlebrow Muse," 213).

of the emergence of the Public, an abstract force, the theorization of which Auden takes directly from Kierkegaard's essay *The Present Age*. In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard describes the Public as a "phantom… a monstrous abstraction… a mirage… Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction 'the public', consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization – and yet are held together as a whole."[22] Directly after quoting from *The Present Age* in describing the Public, Auden offers one of his most damning assessments of the state of contemporary culture:

> Before the phenomenon of the Public appeared in society, there existed only naïve art and sophisticated art which were different from each other but only in the way that two brothers are different… The appearance of the Public and the mass media which cater to it have destroyed naïve popular art. The sophisticated 'highbrow' artist survives and can still work as he did a thousand years ago, because his audience is too small to interest the mass media… What the mass media offer is not popular art, but entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish.[23]

For Auden, then, the emergence of the Public, under the auspices of mass media, has eliminated the vast cultural resources of "naïve" popular art, which has been replaced by interchangeable instances of "entertainment".[24] While highbrow art also faces challenges, it is better equipped to

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[22] *The Present Age and Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row: 1962; originally published 1939), 59-60. This later printing reproduces Dru's original translation of both works, which originally appeared in 1939. *The Present Age* is a translation of part of a longer work, *Two Ages*, which starts out as a book review of a contemporary Danish novel before spinning out into broader social commentary. This work was only available in English in Dru's partial translation until the complete translation of *Two Ages* in the 1970s. In a curious but telling move, Dwight Macdonald ends "Masscult and Midcult" with a long quotation from Dru's translation of *The Present Age*, which includes the above quote. The last line of the essay is a simple summation from Macdonald: "This is the essence of what I have tried to say" (*Against the American Grain*, 74-5). Auden, meanwhile, includes the same quote in his anthology of selections from Kierkegaard (*The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*, ed. W.H. Auden, [New York: David McKay Company, 1952], 40-1). That Kierkegaard would prove equally important in the cultural critiques of the socialist leftist critic Macdonald and the increasingly politically unplaceable Auden shows that Kierkegaard's cultural theories had reach far beyond a religious or existentialist audience.

[23] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume IV – 1956-1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 512-3.

[24] He asserts in several essays that the only remaining lowbrow art is comic art, such as that of Groucho Marx, which in its anarchic sense of play resists the standardizing demands of management. See, for example, "Squares and Oblongs," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. II*, 348.

resist the lures of mass entertainment precisely because it knows its audience to be of necessity small. In fact, poetry presents a unique mode of resistance to mass culture, since it demands a personal response from the reader; it cannot be passed over like other forms of culture, because the reader who seeks to consume it "like a can of soup" will find it "indigestible" – poetry must be *read*, by which Auden means "entered into by a personal encounter".[25] Yet the contemporary poet faces the great temptation to capitulate to the Public, to utter what Auden calls "a resonant lie" in order to appeal to the changing tastes of the crowd – in other words, to become in Auden's dismissive shorthand (following Kierkegaard's denunciations of the press in *The Present Age*) a journalist.[26]

Despite these pitfalls, Auden saw in the conditions of his day a reason for poets to hope; a very Kierkegaardian reason indeed. Buffetted by so many disjointed social pressures, poets could no longer, as in what Auden saw as days of greater social cohesion, produce truthful works out of the fabric of their society; the task of personal development fell squarely on the shoulders of the individual: "The difficulty of being an artist in an age when one has to live everything for oneself, has its compensations. It is, for the strong, a joy to know that now there are no longer any places of refuge in which one can lie down in comfort, that one must go on or go under, live dangerously or not at all."[27] If this sounds suspiciously like Kierkegaard's injunction to embrace life "out over 70,000 fathoms," there is a reason for this resonance.[28] In *The Present Age* Kierkegaard, having railed against the Public and its abstraction for most of the essay, turns at

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[25] W.H. Auden, "A Short Defense of Poetry," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume V – 1963-1968*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 119-20.
[26] Auden, W.H., *Collected Poems*, 811. See also the essay "The Rewards of Patience" in Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume II*, 153-8.
[27] W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. II*, 157.
[28] Auden would directly reference the 70,000 fathoms in Prospero's speech in *The Sea and the Mirror* (*Collected Poems*, 409).

the end to consider the possible benefits of a society built on abstraction: "No longer can the individual… turn to the great for help… he is either lost in the dizziness of unending abstraction or saved for ever in the reality of religion… the development is, in spite of everything, a progress because all the individuals who are saved will receive the specific weight of religion, its essence at first hand, from God himself."[29] What is lost numerically, be it adherence to true belief or readership of real poetry, is gained in the intensity of individual commitment. No longer able to fall back on inherited beliefs or methods, the religious person and the poet must alike make their way forward through individual effort of will.

Auden, following Kierkegaard, considered this a gain for poetry; as mass culture exposed the pretensions of middlebrow culture to easy mastery, poetry would act as a repository for what Auden called "personal speech," the use of language that allows for true communication between individuals, as opposed to the impersonal communication of "codes".[30] As Kierkegaard constantly addressed his reader as "that single individual," disdaining bestseller status in favor of works that would speak to readers keen enough to listen, so Auden saw in poetry the possibility of forging personal links between poet and reader. His 1939 poem "Like a Vocation," written just after his emigration, imagines the task of reaching the individual reader as the most important one a poet can perform. After warning against the temptations of trying to impress great leaders and crowds, the poet finds his true audience: "The one who needs you, that terrified/Imaginative child who only knows you/As what the uncles call a lie/… and is

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[29] Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 81-2.

[30] Auden returns to the idea of personal speech repeatedly in his criticism of this period. See, for example, the fourth lecture of his lecture series *Secondary Worlds*, in Auden, *Prose Vol. V*, 308-324. Auden's distinction between "codes" and "personal speech" is close to another of his taxonomies, that of the crowd versus the society versus the community, of which the community is the most ideal form of organization. Once again, this division owes a very obvious debt to Kierkegaard's theories of the Public. See, for example, "Squares and Oblongs," in W.H. Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden – Prose Volume IV: 1956-1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 68. For a fruitful discussion of Auden and community, see Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

neither/Charming, successful, nor a crowd;/Alone among the noise and policies of summer,/His weeping climbs towards your life like a vocation."[31] For Auden, then, the vagaries of the modern poetic situation can be redeemed through reaching individual readers who will connect with the personal speech of the poet.[32]

Though less voluminously or systematically than Auden, R.S. Thomas also spent time musing on the role of poetry in contemporary society. He too distrusted mass society, a suspicion seen most obviously in his ambiguous response to science and technology; notoriously a technophobe, Thomas nevertheless incorporated scientific language into his poems, apparently in an attempt to maintain poetry's relevance amidst a shifting cultural landscape.[33] Despite this acquiescence to modern science, Thomas remained distrustful of mass culture and its potential for distraction. Speaking of his time in a Welsh tourist hub he recalls: "The views were miraculous, but the most common sight was the rows of cars and the motorists with their heads in newspapers swallowing the petty news of the materialist world"; he then laments the destruction of the remnants of medieval Wales by the ravenous demands of the twentieth century.[34] Thomas felt not only the Welsh landscape but poetry itself as under attack by an

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[31] Written just after Auden met his future partner Chester Kallman, "Like a Vocation" doubles as both a reflection on art and what Edward Mendelson describes as a "visionary love poem" (*Early Auden, Later Auden*, 375-9). This connection between love poetry and meditations on art becomes a frequent occurrence in Auden's later poetry, as we shall see. Erica Riggs sees "Like a Vocation" as an important step along Auden's path toward personal speech as guiding poetic method ("W.H. Auden's Progress Towards Personal Speech," *English Studies in Canada* 15, no. 2 [June 1989]: 187-8. Rachel Wetzsteon argues for the strong influence of Kierkegaard on the poem (*Influential Ghosts*, 85-6).

[32] Responding to the putative question of who he hopes his readers will be, Auden offers this Kierkegaardian sentiment: "Occasionally I come across a book which I feel has been written especially for me and for me only. Like a jealous lover, I don't want anybody else to hear of it. To have a million such readers, unaware of each other's existence, to be read with passion and never talked about, is the daydream, surely, of every author" ("Prologue – Reading," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV*, 463).

[33] See Ned Thomas and John Barnie, "Probings: An Interview with R.S. Thomas", in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. William V. Davis (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 37, 41.

[34] *Autobiographies*, trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1997), 76-7. Though he wrote all his poems in English, Thomas learned Welsh in mid-career, and insisted on writing his memoirs in the language. His regret at not being a native Welsh speaker is a theme in his later career; he viewed Welsh as important for preserving the culture of Wales against the rapacious attentions of the English, an important analog to his distrust of mass culture's

attempt to "Downgrade contemporary poetry to a fringe activity of the scientific-technological and politico-economic society in England today."[35] Like Auden, Thomas felt that the dissolution of society was a detriment to poetic communication, and, like his English compatriot, filtered his response through his reading of Kierkegaard. In his essay "The Creative Writer's Suicide," which takes its guiding vision from *The Present Age*, Thomas presents, in terms that echo both Auden and Kierkegaard, the tricky situation of the poet in contemporary society: "Kierkegaard defined a poet as one who suffers… but the sound which comes out is so sweet to the ears of the listeners that they press him to sing again… Here we see the first temptation for the creative writer to commit suicide, namely by writing those things which tickle the public's fancy, in order to secure reward or praise, rather than those things he really wants to write."[36] Like Auden, Thomas asserts the importance of the personal vision for the artist, but recognizes the temptation to succumb to the whims of the public, especially in order to secure a living.[37]

Thomas's assessment of poetry explicitly foregrounds religious concerns that often hover in the background of Auden's reflections on contemporary poetry. As a working priest in the Anglican Church in Wales throughout his adult life, Thomas was in a unique position as one whose concerns with religion and poetry had an immediate daily relevance.[38] Despite Thomas's somewhat unconventional – not to say unorthodox – beliefs, Christianity remained a touchstone

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tendency to consume the past. For more on Thomas and language, see especially Donald Davie, who detects in the "peculiar gracelessness" of Thomas' English verse a deliberate resistance to English hegemony ("R.S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales", in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 138). For more on Thomas' precarious status as a Welsh nationalist who also happened to be a minister in the Church in Wales (the Welsh branch of the Church of England), see Sargent, Andrew, "R.S. Thomas: The Anglican Compromise," *Renascence* 67.1 (Winter 2015): 41-55.

[35] Thomas and Barnie, "Probings," 41.

[36] "The Creative Writer's Suicide," in *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983), 70. Thomas takes his definition of the poet here from the Diapsalmata in *Either/Or*.

[37] Ibid, 71.

[38] The combination of Thomas' strongly felt Welsh nationalism with his service in a church formed and governed by the dominant imperial power of Britain created a sense of frisson in his life, one heightened by the fact that he wrote poetry in his first language of English, feeling that he could not write it properly in Welsh, but otherwise advocated for the preservation of the Welsh language.

for him throughout his life, and undergirded his poetry of religious questioning. The oddity of his vocational duality prompted Thomas many times to defend the validity of both his priestly and poetic vocations, but more interesting than this defense is the way Thomas sensed the intermingling of the declining fortunes of Christianity and poetry in contemporary England. He saw a direct connection between "secularism and its abstractionism" and the shrinking of interest in religion and poetry, for secularism has at its center "the commercial element," and reduces all cultural objects to their "saleability".[39] Worse than this, in Thomas's view, was the capitulation of churches to secularist logic, leading to an aesthetic decline full of "tasteless hybrids" between the old and new;[40] Christianity's unwillingness to stand against the modernist forces had, according to Thomas, led to a religion "Less and less capable of sustaining that creative tension of the intellect and the emotions out of which the good life and the good poem can be born."[41] For Thomas, then, the problem of the religious poet in the modern age lies not so much in the loss of audience as the erosion of meaning, abstraction having robbed society of its ability to interpret religious aesthetics.[42] As the concrete materiality found in both nature and the artistic vision of medieval Christianity gives way to the abstract materialism of the twentieth century, the public becomes less and less able to recognize God's presence in either nature or the church.

Thomas explores this Kierkegaardian critique of modern society in his ekphrastic poem "Souillac: Le Sacrifice d'Abraham," a meditation on a column in the church of the French abbey of Souillac that depicts the Biblical account of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac. Reflecting on this striking medieval sculpture, Thomas – who in the poem simultaneously

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[39] "A Frame for Poetry," in *Selected Prose*, 92-3.
[40] Thomas and Barnie, "Probings," 24.
[41] Thomas, "A Frame for Poetry," 94.
[42] See Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence – Images of God Explored* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 117-19.

references Kierkegaard's multiple depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* – thinks of the power of art in previous eras:

> This is what art could do,
> Interpreting faith
> With serene chisel.
> The resistant stone
> Is quiet as our breath,
> And is accepted.[43]

The "serene chisel" that interprets faith belongs, in Thomas' view, to the medieval craftsman, not the contemporary poet. In Thomas's wistful words, this is what art *could* do, but can do no longer, because the "resistant stone" is no longer accepted. According to Thomas' evaluation, the modern religious poet faces challenges unknown to the medieval sculptor, because society has sacrificed imaginative unity for technological gains.[44] Whereas a medieval craftsman might spend years on a single sculpture, chipping away at the "resistant stone" – a pace which afforded time to reflect and carve the piece with unity – the twentieth century push for a never-ending stream of new gadgets and convenient entertainments has led to confusion and incoherence.[45]

Unity – in the Coleridgean sense of imaginative unity – becomes in Thomas' schema the goal of both poet and priest alike. For Thomas, "The poet by echoing the primary imagination,

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[43] *The Collected Poetry of R.S. Thomas: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 147.
[44] Thomas, as a Welsh nationalist, felt the pull of unity strongly, often railing against the dissolution of Welsh identity at the hands of English influence over language and customs.
[45] It is of course possible to consider Thomas' attitudes regarding modern and medieval craftsmanship as both hopelessly nostalgic and elitist. As ever, Raymond Williams provides the strongest historical critique of nostalgia, noting that this particular phenomenon of bemoaning industrialized craftsmanship extends back at least to the Romantics, even arguing that the complaints of British Marxists in the 1930s were largely a rehash of Romantic complaints of the early nineteenth century (*Culture and Society: 1780-1950* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1983], 34, 271). For a thorough (if polemic) treatment of intellectuals and elitism, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992). Discussing Roland Barthes, Carey takes direct aim at the valorization of the middle ages: "The craftsman, like the peasant, is envisaged by the intellectual as a respectful, contented, wholly meritorious subordinate, in tune with nature. But the mass (in this case the version of the mass called the bourgeoisie), with its unnatural appetite for plastic (or, in an earlier era, for tinned food), reveals itself as unnatural, and not fully or wholesomely human" (216). For an argument linking Kierkegaard directly to such elitism, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread & Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 106.

Figure 2. The sacrifice of Isaac, Sainte-Marie Abbey of Souillac. Photo courtesy of Pol Mayer.

recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves… The world needs the unifying power of the imagination. The two things which give it best are poetry and religion."[46] As difficult as the task may be, the poet must strive to "force" the reader into a position of recreating, spurring the reader toward the "unifying power of the imagination," which will counteract the dissipating tendencies of modernity. The poet must therefore stand in contradistinction to the Public, with its nose buried in the newspapers. Though he allowed for other sources, Thomas, unlike the more urban Auden, drew his imaginative strength primarily from nature and religion, both of which he saw as cultivating the attention span necessary to exercise imaginative unity. Thomas's frequent combination of natural settings and theological ruminations sprang from his sense that both nature and God required sustained patience, a willingness to wait, before they would reveal their glories. In his poem "Sea-watching" Thomas connects the act of prayer with birdwatching (a favorite hobby of his):

> Ah, but a rare bird is
> rare. It is when one is not looking,
> at times one is not there
> that it comes.
> You must wear your eyes out,
> as others their knees.
> I became the hermit
> of the rocks, habited with the wind
> and the mist. There were days,
> so beautiful the emptiness
> it might have filled,
> its absence
> was as its presence; not to be told
> any more, so single my mind
> after its long fast,
> my watching from praying.[47]

[46] "Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*," in *Selected Prose*, 64.
[47] Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 306.

"You must wear your eyes out,/as others their knees" could stand as Thomas's motto for writing poetry, as for seeking after God. While the Public demands the instant gratification of technological progress (symbolized for Thomas, as for Kierkegaard, by the relentless novelty of the newspaper page), the poetically – and religiously – inclined seek hermitage among the difficult crags of the imagination. But the poet seeks to convey to others the same need for patience; in "Sea-watching" Thomas invites the reader to share in his waiting through the use of enjambment (especially in the tautological lines "A rare bird is/rare"); simple, often monosyllabic diction; and a verse form that not only visually mimics the waves of the sea, but creates empty space the eye must process.[48] Like Auden, Thomas sensed that poetic practice of this sort would be hard-pressed to draw in a large audience, but he too found the trade-off worthwhile.

**Art as Mirror; Poetry as Prayer**

> *Denounce the magical charm of aesthetics – well, there have indeed been times when you might have succeeded in coercing people. But with what result? With the result that privately, with secret passion, they love that magic… Be the amazed listener who sits and hears what the other finds the more delight in telling you because you listen with amazement. But above all do not forget one thing, the purpose you have in mind, the fact that it is the religious you must bring forward. If you are capable of it, present the aesthetic with all its fascinating magic , enthral if possible the other man, present it with the sort of passion which exactly suits him, merrily for the merry, in a minor key for the melancholy, wittily for the witty, &c. But above all do not forget one thing, the purpose you have to bring forward… the religious. By all means do this, and fear not to do it; for truly it cannot be done without fear and trembling* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*[49]

"Poetry makes nothing happen," intones Auden in his conflicted eulogy "In Memory of

[48] As J.P. Ward argues of Thomas's later poetry, "There are elisions, incomplete sequences of thought or feeling, apparent doubts, cancellings, and half-expressions leading to spontaneous connections. The reader is drawn in to fill the for out, or at least partake in it even if incompleteness is still the outcome, so that a dialogue, irritated argument or surprising connection has occurred" (*The Poetry of R.S. Thomas* [Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987], 84).
[49] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 29.

W.B. Yeats."[50] Ironically, this line which disparages poetry's power has had its own huge effect on the critical assessment of Auden's career. The dividing line which runs temptingly through Auden's corpus finds its strongest underscoring in this rejection of the influence of poetry in the world. Gone was the politically engaged Auden of the 1930s, friend of the working class, reformer of society; enter the withdrawn, private Auden, content to muddle around with words in his enclosed sandbox, heedless of the world crashing down around him. Or so goes the narrative, especially from British figures who saw in Auden's move to America a betrayal of his roots and a disfigurement of his legacy.[51] As his most famous critic, Philip Larkin himself, put it: "At one stroke he lost his key subject and emotion – Europe and the fear of war – and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns."[52]

While undoubtedly important, Auden's move to America cannot be singled out as *the* defining event in his poetic career, not least because it was not originally intended as a permanent move. Though tempting to consider his move to America as a flight from reality, since Britain would soon thereafter enter a war that America would remain neutral in for several more years, such a belief occludes the real intellectual work that went into Auden's change of mind. Foremost among his intellectual influences during this period, we must consider the work of Kierkegaard insofar as it touches on the role of the aesthetic in relation to the religious. Though many critics have noted potential formal analogues in Auden's 1940s poetry to the "stages of life" identified by Kierkegaard – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – a surface

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[50] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 248.
[51] More sensitive critics have long held a more complex view of the changes in Auden's beliefs and poetry. Edward Mendelson is especially good in identifying the roots of Auden's supposedly sudden shifts post-exile in a growing sense of discontent throughout the 1930s (*Early Auden, Later Auden*, 236, 279, 317).
[52] "What's Become of Wystan?" *The Spectator* (London), Jul. 15, 1960: 24.

level reading of these coincidences has been the norm.[53] What has been missed is the intensely personal interest Auden took in Kierkegaard's ideas of literary vocation; Kierkegaard's distinction between aesthetic genius and the special religious vocation of the Apostle forced Auden to grapple with his own notions of what purpose poetry serves, and what a poet should think about his or her own work. As Auden said to a friend, Kierkegaard "knocked the conceit" out of him.[54] Even decades later, after distancing himself from his initial enthusiasm for Kierkegaard, Auden would recognize the profound impact of Kierkegaard upon his own self-evaluation: "His essential warning is directed… to the gifted man, the individual endowed with an exceptional talent for art or science or philosophy… indeed, he is a prophet, calling the talented to repentance. No person of talent who has read him can fail to realize that the talented man, even more than the millionaire, is the rich man for whom it is so difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."[55]

The short length of Kierkegaard's essay "On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" belies its outsized influence on the Anglo-American literary tradition. It was this essay that convinced Walker Percy to join the Catholic Church and, no less significantly, confronted Auden with the limitations of poetry. While other works by Kierkegaard warn of the dangers of the aesthetic life, "Genius and Apostle" specifically addresses the makers of aesthetic objects. In essence, Kierkegaard sees the distinction between the two figures as follows:

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[53] George W. Bahlke recognizes that *The Sea and the Mirror* and Auden's criticism surrounding it owes a great deal to Kierkegaard, but he reads Auden's appropriation of Kierkegaard primarily in world-historical terms (*The Later Auden: From "New Year Letter" to* About the House [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970], 27, 62). Edward Callan argues that "New Year Letter" employs a triadic structure which maps onto the three stages of life (*Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*, 173-8). With a little more attention to specifics than is usually found, Herman Servotte finds in Part II of *The Sea and the Mirror* an instantiation of most of the types of despair taxonomized by Kierkegaardian fictional author Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death* ("Auden and Kierkegaard," in *Multiple Worlds, Multiple Words: Essays in Honour of Irène Simon*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Pierre Michel, and Paulette Michel-Michot [Liège: University of Liège Press, 1987] 275-282).
[54] Qtd. in Mendelson, *Early Auden, Later Auden*, 455.
[55] Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Collected Prose Vol. V*, 373.

> A genius and an Apostle are qualitatively different, they are definitions which each belong in their own spheres: *the sphere of immanence, and the sphere of transcendence… Genius has only an immanent teleology; the Apostle is placed as absolute paradoxical teleology*… Genius is… immediateness… it is a natural qualification, genius is born. Even long before there can be any question as to how far genius is prepared to relate its particular gifts to God, it is genius, and it remains genius even if it does not do so… An Apostle is not born; an Apostle is a man called and appointed by God, receiving a mission from him… to become an Apostle is not preceded by any potential possibility; essentially every man is equally near to becoming one. An Apostle can never come to himself in such a way that he becomes conscious of his apostolic calling as a factor in the development of his life. Apostolic calling is a paradoxical factor, which from first to last in his life stands paradoxically outside his personal identity with himself as the definite person he is… The humorous self-sufficiency of genius is the unity of a modest resignation in the world and a proud elevation above the world: of being an unnecessary superfluity and a precious ornament… [if] he is an author, who abolishes every teleological relation to his environment and humorously defines himself as a poet… The lyrical author is only concerned with his production, enjoys the pleasure of producing, often perhaps only after pain and effort; but he has nothing to do with others, he does not write in order that: in order to enlighten men or in order to help them along the right road.[56]

I quote the essay at such great length not merely to thoroughly illustrate the contours of Kierkegaard's dichotomy, but also to emphasize the extent to which Auden's very language regarding poetry in this period comes directly from Kierkegaard. References to Apostles as the foil to artists abound in Auden's criticism, most notably in his discussion of two Ibsen plays, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, which to his mind represent the apostle and genius, respectively.[57] Beyond this, Auden increasingly recognizes the place of poetry as the immanent sphere, unable to ascend to the transcendent because of its natural limitations. As a "secular" activity poetry, like science,

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[56] Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Present Age and On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, 90-2, 108.
[57] In his essay "Foreword: *Brand* versus *Peer*," Auden lifts his definitions nearly word for word from Kierkegaard: "In the case of any vocation of Genius, a man is called to it by a natural gift with which he is already endowed… An Apostle, on the other hand, is called by God directly… the poet has no need of other people as others, only as a source of his experiences. His poems may require the existence of others to read them, but he is self-sufficient" (*The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume IV*, 232). Auden engages in a similar discussion of the two plays in his essay in *The Dyer's Hand* titled "Genius and Apostle". A notable feature of Auden's discussion of these two plays is that he sees *Brand* as a failure precisely because it attempts the impossible: an aesthetic depiction of the religious. See also his essay on D.H. Lawrence from *The Dyer's Hand*, where he elevates the Apostle at the expense of the genius: "The artist, the man who makes, is less important to mankind, for good or evil, than the apostle, the man with a message" (Ibid, 647).

can only ever be "small beer" next to the demands of Christianity – a fact which Auden connects to the perpetual discomfort of all poets who are also Christians: their genius chafes against the limitations imposed by the transcendent sphere.[58] The poet who can accept such limitations, however, has the consolations of a self-aware superfluity. He or she regains the ornamental nature of aesthetic creation and can take pride in a well-crafted poem without worrying over its societal effects.[59]

Auden's more vocal critics have rightly sensed the danger Auden's adopted position poses to Romantic and modernist conceptions of the artist; it is unsurprising that two of his most ardent critics, Larkin and Randall Jarrell, were both practicing poets as well as critics.[60] For Auden, however, this stance was both pragmatic and principled: pragmatic because poets had deluded themselves too long into believing Shelley's grandiose description of them as the "unacknowledged legislators of the World"; principled because, even if poets could attain to the power to change the world, they would most likely use this power for ill.[61] What critics have sometimes wrongly construed as a detachment from politics in Auden's later life is rather a separation of the aesthetic from the political; he remained as political as ever, especially during

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[58] "Postscript: Christianity and Art," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV*, 775.

[59] In his lectures on Shakespeare, Auden praises the Bard precisely because he sees him as having accepted the basic frivolity of art. Unlike geniuses like "Dante, Joyce, and Milton," Shakespeare finds the right balance between craft and life: "To be able to devote one's life to art without forgetting that art is frivolous is a tremendous achievement of personal character. Shakespeare never takes himself too seriously. When art takes itself too seriously, it tries to do more than it can. For secular art to exist, it's highly advantageous to artists, whatever their belief, to support religion. When supernatural religion disappears, art becomes either magic that is run by authorities through force of fraud, or falsehood that becomes persecuted by science" (Auden, W.H., *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 319).

[60] Jarrell expresses his discontent with Auden's pessimism about the power of poetry thusly: "The fundamental structural picture underlying the poems is that of *waiting humbly for Grace*; man's ultimate accomplishment is *sitting still*… his morals are now… merely a crutch to beat people into submission with, to force home to us the realization… that no works can either save us or make us worth saving… Over and over Auden attacks every 'good' act, every attempt to 'improve'" ("Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology," in *Critical Essays on W.H. Auden*, ed. George W. Bahlke [New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991], 23, 25, 28).

[61] Auden hated Shelley's pronouncement – as well as his poetry: "Sounds more like the secret police to me," he once quipped (*The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. II*, 348). He also repeatedly claimed that world history would be substantially unaltered if all the great artists were to be erased from it.

the charged war years, but he no longer felt that the poet could serve political ends *as poet*, only as a citizen.[62]

While this stance necessitates a certain skepticism toward the very idea of religious poetry, or poetry that moves the reader toward meaningful change of any sort, Auden does not completely discount the ability of poetry to positively affect its reader.[63] The one thing the aesthetic may do to communicate truth is to hold a mirror up to readers, reflecting their own desires back on them. As opposed to purgative or affective theories of art, where art arouses certain emotions in the audience – in order either to negate them or amplify them – under Auden's reflective vision of art, the reader "Becomes conscious of his feelings good and bad, and of what their relations to each other are in fact."[64] Truly artistic poetry, then, reveals to its reader the reality of the world, and his or her place in it, stripping away the illusions conjured up by more propagandistic forms of communication like advertising and journalism. Auden became fascinated in this period with art's potential as a means of "disenchantment" contra the "magic" of propaganda; this view of art as a disenchanting mirror becomes central to *The Sea and the Mirror*.[65] Critically, however, art can only present possibility to the reader, not force her or him

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[62] At his most cynical, Auden seemed to regard political art as mere posturing done for social gain: "By all means let a poet, if he wants to, write engagé poems, protesting against this or that political evil or social injustice. But let him remember this. The only person who will benefit from them is himself; they will enhance his literary reputation among those who feel as he does. The evil or injustice, however, will remain exactly what it would have been if he had kept his mouth shut" (*A Certain World*, in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Volume VI – 1969-1973*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 68.

[63] "There can no more be a 'Christian' art than there can be a Christian science or a Christian diet. There can only be a Christian spirit in which an artist, a scientist, does or does not work. A painting of the Crucifixion is not necessarily more Christian in spirit than a still life, and may very well be less… Poems, like many of Donne's and Hopkins', which express a poet's personal feelings of religious devotion or penitence, make me uneasy" (Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV*, 776-7).

[64] Auden, "The Question of the Pound Award," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. III*, 102. The context of this essay is especially revealing; in defending Ezra Pound's right to receive a major artistic award despite his extended flirtations with Italian fascism, Auden reinforces the separation in his mind between art and artist – the artist need not be noble for their art to be excellent, even illuminating.

[65] For the best overview of art as disenchantment, see Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 163-203. Arthur Kirsch insightfully connects Auden to St. Augustine in his distrust of the "magic" of rhetoric (*Auden and Christianity* [New Haven: Yale

to make the right choice. The aesthetic, then, can only present truth indirectly, as a matter of reflection, but this indirect presentation can still have enormous impact: as Kierkegaard argues, "An illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed."[66] Poetry should strive, in Auden's system, to present truth in such a way that it must be appropriated by the individual; it functions, in other words, as literature which strips the reader of his or her illusions.[67]

Thomas's work shares with Auden's a fascination with the image of the mirror – oddly enough, usually in connection with the sea.[68] As in Auden, the mirror presents an image that can reveal, but must be appropriated by the individual. Thomas explicitly links the role of the "mirror" in personal development to the writings of Kierkegaard in his poem "Fathoms" (a most Kierkegaardian title):

> Young I visited
> this pool; asked my question,
> passed on…
> Today, thirty years
> later, on the margin
> of eternity, dissolution,
> nothing but the self
> looking up at the self
> looking down, with each
> refusing to become
> an object, so with Kierkegaard's
> help, from bottomless fathoms

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University Press, 2005], 51). For more on Auden's connection to Augustine, see Stephen J. Schuler, *The Augustinian Theology of W.H. Auden* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

[66] *Point of View*, 24.

[67] As Alan Jacobs says of Auden's late view: "Silence is best; indirection the only valid alternative" (*What Became of Wystan* [Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1998], 90). Lucy McDiarmid suggests that Auden hoped to show – through the very failure of his poetry to adequately express religious truth – the need for truth beyond poetry (*Auden's Apologies for Poetry* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990], 12).

[68] Thomas confesses to becoming "Obsessed with the mirror image, comparing the sea now to a window, now to a looking glass" ("An Autobiographical Essay," in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, 17). See also Davis, *R.S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, 74; and Tony Brown, "'Over Seventy Thousand Fathoms': The Sea and Self Definition in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas," in *The Page's Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas (Brigend: Seren, 1994), 162.

I dredge up the truth.[69]

Here Kierkegaard acts as midwife at the birth of a new understanding in Thomas. Seasoned by life and approaching mortality, he can finally appropriate his reflection in the pool to make change in his life, dredging up the truth where once he merely passed on.[70]

Yet in some ways Thomas disagreed with Auden (and Kierkegaard) regarding the poet's prospects for communicating about truth. As noted above, Thomas held out a great deal of hope for the poetic method of creating imaginative unity. His major criticism of Kierkegaard stemmed from his view that Kierkegaard abandoned poetry for a religious calling, thereby possibly tainting the poetic profession in the eyes of religious people.[71] Clearly Thomas held to a much more optimistic view of poetry's place in the world than post-conversion Auden, for whom poetry could never do more than hint at its own designs. Despite this optimism, however, the net result of Thomas's view of "religious" art looks strikingly similar in practice to Auden's, albeit for different reasons. While Auden upheld Christian dogma as a reliable guide to truth while downplaying poetry's role in discovering this truth, Thomas gave almost equal weight to poetry and religion but, since he returned repeatedly to the idea of God's unknowability, both methods rely, according to Thomas, on patience, guesswork, and luck. For Auden and Thomas, then, poetry that seeks to excavate religious truth can only do so indirectly; both thus subscribe to Kierkegaard's idea of aesthetic communication as indirect. The poet is one who prods the reader

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[69] *Collected Later Poems: 1988-2000* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), 214.
[70] The lines "nothing but the self/looking up at the self/looking down, with each/refusing to become/an object" echo the infamous opening of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, where author Anti-Climacus describes the concept of the self as relation: "The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and eternal, of freedom and necessity… Looked at in this way a human being is not yet a self" (*The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay [London: Penguin, 2004], 43). This passage emphasizes selfhood as a process of becoming, as does Thomas's poem.
[71] Ormond, "Priest and Poet," 52.

toward religious encounter, but only indirectly, through a series of maneuvers which disguise the poet's presence.

Flowing out of this emphasis on indirectness, both Auden and Thomas see the reading of poetry as a discipline, which connects it to the disciplines of spirituality. They see poetry's place in religious life as analogous to that of prayer, because both see prayer less as a means of requesting and receiving favors from God, and more as a means of training the mind's attention – an especially important discipline amidst the hubbub of modernity. Auden, drawing on Simone Weil, calls prayer the directing of attention toward a single object – including, but not limited to, God – and considers this discipline the key to guarding one's personal life in a technological society.[72] He goes on to conclude that this training of attention, a secularized version of prayer, should be the primary end of modern education. Since for Auden reading poetry involves beholding a reflection of one's own inner state, it would seem to provide a unique opportunity for the practice of this secularized prayer. "Indigestible" to most readers who crave only empty calories, true poetry will be read and reread by those who find its difficulty stimulating, and by engaging in this careful reading the audience may come to better understand their own desires and inclinations better than they would through focusing merely on their immediately felt emotions.[73] The difficulty of poetry allows it to be used "indirectly" by the individual as a means of sharpening the attention. I argue, then, that Auden's amplification of verbal excess – in particular, his flirtations with loquacious prose style – constitutes for him a means of sharpening the reader's attention: the way to understanding lies through a thicket of verbal misdirection.

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[72] See Auden, "Culture and Leisure," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. V*, 416.
[73] George Bahlke, speaking of Prospero's speech in *The Sea and the Mirror*, argues that "The lyric as a whole is a comment in Kierkegaardian terms on the value of the aesthetic sphere as a means of showing men to themselves as they are – freed from the pretensions of their egoistic fantasies – and thus of forming a basis for the movement from the aesthetic to the religious sphere" (*The Later Auden*, 92-3).

Though critics like Larkin found later Auden "too verbose to be memorable,"[74] this verbosity in fact constitutes a deliberate strategy on the part of Auden – if poetry became too memorable, too easily assimilated, it would lose its power to sting the reader into reflection.

For Thomas, poetry and prayer are alike in that they both afford the individual the opportunity to experience the "via negativa," the approach to God that entails a stripping away of all false impressions – in essence a form of "indirectness" in one's approach to God. In Christian mysticism, the tradition of "via negativa" involves eliminating the various ideas of God that cannot be true from one's mind, thereby backing up into a greater knowledge of God indirectly. For Thomas, the "via negativa" became an approach not just to life, but poetry. Critics have noted that the turn in his poetry of the 1970s involves a questioning of language alongside his religious questions, and the two problems are bound tightly together for Thomas. Poetry and prayer, then, consist primarily of silence, of a waiting in the absence for some sense of presence to emerge. Locked in prayer, Thomas echoes St. Augustine, praying to God: "Prompt me, God;/But not yet. When I speak,/Though it be you who speak/Through me, something is lost./The meaning is in the waiting." Though he may speak with the official authority of the apostolic office in his role as a preacher, Thomas cannot, as a poet, do more than hint indirectly at the approach to God. The radical simplicity of his late style creates gaps wherein the reader may make her or his own tentative approach to the religious sphere – just as Auden's late poetry forces the reader to pay attention to wade through its excesses, so Thomas's late poetry instills the readerly virtue of patience, its sparseness slowing down the reading process and allowing the reader to wander through the empty spaces of the poems. Though their late poetry looks radically different, then, both poets employ a similar, Kierkegaardian logic in their approach to

[74] "What's Become of Wystan?," 24.

communicating through poetry: the reader must be prompted to choose and act on her or his own; though the poet cannot hope to control the reader's response, they can at least create an environment in which it is possible for the reader to become aware of her or his own inner state, and perhaps choose to change it.

## One Circumlocution: Auden, Verbal Excess, and Indirect Communication

> *From the point of view of my whole activity as an author, integrally conceived, the aesthetic work is a deception, and herein is to be found the deeper significance of the use of pseudonyms. A deception, however, is a rather ugly thing. To this I would make answer: One my not let oneself by deceived by the word 'deception'. One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*[75]

One of the poems that best encapsulates the misdirections of Auden's late style is "'The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning'". A poem about the art of writing poetry, "Feigning" exhibits the looseness and excess of style of Auden's later period, pitched in the comic mode he so often employed in the second half of his career. Ostensibly a set of precepts to others who would become poets, the poem advocates for an indirect style, urging the poet manqué to "Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever/And do not listen to those critics ever/Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books/Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks."[76] These lines hearken back to Auden's critical writings, where he praises poetry for its ability to resist thoughtless consumption in an age of mass blandness. The poem instantiates this theory of subtle complications, inserting multiple asides in parentheses, using diction that swings from the slangy to the hifalutin ("hullabaloo," "hippocampi," "panygeric," "reticulator") and making multiple, slightly obscure mythological references (Endymion, Amphisboene). The poem's greatest trick, however, comes in its structural misdirection. For almost its entire length, "Feigning" takes as its

[75] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 39.
[76] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 619.

subject the writing of a love poem, going through the ways in which the poet must transmute his love for a particular individual into poetic language so it can be universalized. Only in the final stanza does the true subject of the poem – the difficulties of communicating poetically about religious truth – emerge:

> For given Man, by birth, by education,
> Imago Dei who forgot his station,
> The self-made creature who himself unmakes,
> The only creature ever made who fakes,
> With no more nature in his loving smile
> Than in his theories of a natural style,
> What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
> Can trick his lying nature into saying
> That love, or truth in any serious sense,
> Like orthodoxy, is a reticence?[77]

Here Auden engages in a complex reworking of the entire meaning of the poem, pulling out the rug from under the reader, who expects a conclusion that reinforces the poem's previous statements on the need to exaggerate in writing love poetry. Instead, what Auden delivers is a stanza on the limits of communication, of the need for the "luck of verbal playing" in getting across serious points. Auden brings into focus the general strategy of the poem: in expanding on the need to avoid direct statement in describing human love, the poem in fact edges around the very thing it cannot express – the divine love between humans and God. While love poetry is possible because it universalizes the particular love of the poet, any attempt to universalize religious experience will miscommunicate about the nature of that experience.[78] What is left for the poet, then, is the negative approach, the stripping away of false impressions. By unmasking

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[77] Ibid, 621.

[78] Auden theorizes this in his "Postcript: Christianity and Art," in *The Dyer's Hand*: "It is quite in order that a poet should write a sonnet expressing his devotion to Miss Smith because the poet, Miss Smith, and all his readers know perfectly well that, had he chanced to fall in love with Miss Jones instead, his feelings would be exactly the same. But if he writes a sonnet expressing his devotion to Christ, the important point, surely, is that his devotion is felt for Christ and not for, say, Buddha or Mahomet, and this point cannot be made in poetry; the Proper Name proves nothing" (*The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV*, 777).

the artifice of the poet's art – the ways in which poets erase individual encounter in their attempt to aestheticize love – Auden strongly demarcates the limits of poetry in talking of anything of significance.[79] What remains, after poetry has gone, is silence.

Yet significance can still be found in the poem itself. It is precisely in the sense of poetry as a game that Auden allows for its ability to communicate. Where deliberate communication fails, "the luck of verbal playing" allows a space for intimate connection between reader and text. An intimate recognition of the poem's message starts with understanding its misleading structure – the long, loose, rambling body cut short by a brief, contradictory epilog – but it includes other factors as well. The keen eye sees a pun in the very first line of the final stanza (as Auden notes in the first stanza, "Good poets have a weakness for bad puns"),[80] a wordplay with theological significance: "For given man" simultaneously states the problem of evil (given man as he is in the fallen world), and the solution (forgiven man, the gap between words closed as the gap between humans and God). The final stanza is rife with such verbal playing, from the repetition of variations of "made" that hint at a tension between the status of humans as created beings and their prideful desire to make themselves ("The self-made creature who himself unmakes/ The only creature ever made who fakes");[81] to the play on nature/natural that suggests the dual deceptions of human emotion and poetry that embraces "theories of a natural style".[82] Such excesses of repetition preserve the poem's comic, almost sing-song feeling, while

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[79] In other poems, Auden addresses the inadequacy of poetry to fully capture the experience of human love, as in "One Circumlocution," where "A blank I loves blankly a blank You," and most fully in *Dichtung Und Warheit (An Unwritten Poem)*, a prose exercise where Auden explains to his lover why the specificity of his love made him unable to write the planned love poem (*Collected Poems* 626, 647-63). Here, as in *The Sea and the Mirror*, prose becomes a foil for poetry, its capacity for verboseness providing a fuller work around for Auden's indirectness than the confines of poetry would allow.

[80] Ibid, 619.

[81] It seems likely that Auden, trained in the classics, would recognize the extra pun here: "fake" has as one possible origin the Latin verb "facio," to make – thus making and faking, artistry and lying, are bound up together from the start.

[82] Ibid, 621.

simultaneously creating space for the reader to grasp, through individual interpretive effort, Auden's notions of artistic limitation.

Verbal excess has a vital role to play in preserving the poet, too. Again and again in his later life Auden came back to the idea that poetic self-limitation was key for poets as a means of remaining true in both life and art. Rejecting what he saw as the grandiose pretensions of Romantics like Shelley and modernists like Yeats, Auden sought out examples of artistic modesty.[83] He found one in Kierkegaard, whom he describes as a genius – a clear nod to "Genius and Apostle," and a recognition that Kierkegaard himself realized the limits of his own ability to communicate truth.[84] He found another in Henry James, in some ways an odd role model for a poet, but perfect for Auden's late turn to excess. To Auden, James represented a faithfulness to artistic vocation tied to a recognition of its limits.[85] In his poetic ode to the novelist, "At the Grave of Henry James," Auden employs a Jamesian sense of circumlocution in his stanzas, describing, for example, the earth as "our solar fabric,/That primary machine."[86] James' fussy style, which aims at extreme precision of description, leads the reader round and round, always delaying a final reckoning with the point at hand. For Auden James' eccentricity of style and verbal excess mark him as one especially aware of his vocation, able to resist the temptations of the Public, and in turn to inspire fellow artists to a similar resistance. Auden also depicts James as someone who managed the rare trick of aligning life and art. Repeatedly in this period Auden

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[83] Auden's conflicted views on Yeats come out not only in the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," but in his essay "The People Vs. Yeats". For a good overview on Auden's complicated relation to Yeats, see Callan, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*, 143-162. Speaking specifically about the presence of the author, Callan argues that "[Contra Yeats] Auden felt that, ideally, poets should be as anonymous as the builders of the pyramids" (160).
[84] Auden, *The Collected Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. V*, 373.
[85] See "Henry James and the Dedicated," *The Collected Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. II*, 242-4. Here Auden hints circumspectly at what many have come to believe about James: that he was a closeted, though quite probably celibate, gay man. If Auden accepted this idea, as he seems to have done, James would have special relevance to his own conception as a queer poet of occasional celibacy.
[86] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 311.

denounced poets whose artistic greatness led them to presuppose their own moral greatness, recognizing, through Kierkegaard's influence, that the art produced by geniuses has no bearing on the ethical struggles of their personal lives.[87] James, however, managed to combine artistic vocation and ethical conduct:

> With what an innocence your hand submitted
> To those formal rules that help a child to play,
> While your heart, fastidious as
> A delicate nun, remained true to the rare noblesse
> Of your lucid gift, and for its own sake ignored the
> Resentful muttering Mass…
>
> Preserve me, Master, from its vague incitement,
> Yours be the disciplinary image that holds
> Me back from agreeable wrong,
> And the clutch of eddying Muddle, lest Proportion shed
> The alpine chill of her shrugging editorial shoulder
> On my loose impromptu song.
>
> All will be judged. Master of nuance and scruple,
> Pray for me and for all writers, living or dead:
> Because there are many whose works
> Are in better taste than their lives, because there is no end
> To the vanity of our calling, make intercession
> For the treason of all clerks.[88]

In the middle stanza, Auden intuits a connection between a willingness to embrace an "agreeable wrong" and an acquiescence to the editing that would cut down his "loose, impromptu song." The temptation to court the Public's favor by uttering the resonant lie goes hand in hand with a willingness to simplify personal style, reducing it down to easily digestible bits. By learning from the "Master of nuance and scruple," Auden hoped to tame his own ambitions, recognizing

[87] In "Foreword: *Brand* versus *Peer*," Auden argues that the private lives of poets have no direct connection to their work, as is not the case for apostles. His discussion is taken almost verbatim from Kierkegaard's discussion of the same ideas in "Genius and Apostle" (*The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV*, 232-3).
[88] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 311-2.

the endless vanity of the artistic vocation and pursuing instead the "rare noblesse" of his own gift for elaboration and elucidation.

From the beginning, Henry James has been recognized as a key influence on the style of "Caliban to the Audience," the final section of Auden's long poem *The Sea and the Mirror*, an extended meditation on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[89] Here Caliban, transformed from the barely coherent savage of Shakespeare's play into a sophisticated orator, speaks in florid prose to the audience come to watch *The Tempest* about the nature of artistic creation itself.[90] This rambling discourse, which occupies over half the space of the whole poem, addresses a variety of "audience members" who sit on after the close of the play. Caliban speaks first to those who seek in the play only entertainment, then to those who desire not pleasure but edification in art, then to the general crowd, and finally to the successful among the crowd, at each turn exposing the particular weaknesses of each group. Having concluded his ramble through these categories, however, Caliban finds himself doubting the success of his admonitions:

> I have tried – the opportunity was not to be neglected – to raise the admonitory forefinger, to ring the alarming bell, but with so little confidence of producing the right result, so certain that the open eye and attentive ear will always interpret any sight and any sound to their advantage, every rebuff as a consolation, every prohibition as a rescue – that is what they open and attend for – that I find myself almost hoping, for your sake, that I have had the futile honour of addressing the blind and the deaf.[91]

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[89] Auden himself knew that critics would latch on to the Jamesian elements. In a letter to Theodor Spencer, he said that "Most of them will spot the James pastiche, say this is a piece of virtuosity, which it is, and unseemly levity or meaningless, which it isn't… I have, as you say, a dangerous fondness for 'trucs' [poetic tricks]; I've tried to turn this to advantage by selecting a subject where it is precisely the 'truc' that is the subject; the serious matter being the fundamental frivolity of art" (Qtd. in Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 67).

[90] As noted above, Kierkegaard's influence on the poem has been quite explored, at least at the level of ideas. George Bahlke sees in Caliban's speech a depiction of the aesthetic stage that is wholly negative, as art cannot help the individual achieve transcendence (*The Later Auden,* 116). Dwight Eddins offers a good insight into how Kierkegaard's skepticism regarding the aesthetic translates into Auden's sense of the poem as a series of "games" ("Quitting the Game: Auden's The Sea and the Mirror," *Modern Language Quarterly* 41 [1980]: 73-87). Justin Replogle posits that Caliban aims to "jolt" the reader into the religious sphere, but this seems like a stretch, given Auden's familiarity with Kierkegaard – the best Caliban can do is present the reader with the choice (*Auden's Poetry*, 76-7).

[91] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 442.

In this monstrous run-on sentence, Auden displays his propensity for circumlocution at full strength: the breaking up of the sentence with asides, the parallel structure, the weakening of purpose through modifiers ("almost", "futile") – all point to a speaker hesitant to come out and say what he means: the people will reject his various warnings about art, and find in it what they want. Circumlocution in Caliban's hands returns to its very roots as a moving around the subject, "the futile honour of addressing the blind and deaf" being an especially delicate tiptoeing around the audience's ignorance, stubbornness, or both.

As Caliban reflects on his own inability to enact change, he experiences something of a crisis himself. Imagining himself and his rival/mirror image Ariel (who represents the enchanting aspect of art) as "Sweating and shivering in our moth-eaten ill-fitting stock costumes", Caliban himself manages what he does not think the audience can: he owns up to the image he sees reflected in the mirror of art. This he does in almost explicitly Kierkegaardian terms, again filtered through the thicket of verbiage he employs:

> Yet, at this very moment when we do at last see ourselves as we are, neither cosy nor playful, but swaying out on the ultimate wind-whipped cornice that overhangs the unabiding void — we have never stood anywhere else, —when our reasons are silenced by the heavy huge derision, — There is nothing to say. There never has been,— and our wills chuck in their hands—There is no way out. There never was,— it is at this moment for the first time in our lives we hear, not the sounds which, as born actors, we have hitherto condescended to use as an excellent vehicle for displaying our personalities and looks, but the real Word which is our only *raison d'être.* Not that we have improved; everything, the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies are still present, more obviously than ever; nothing has been reconstructed; our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have: only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch – we understand them at last – are feebly figurative signs, so that all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that we can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours.[92]

[92] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 444.

It is in this passage, which closes Caliban's speech (and, barring a brief postscript from Ariel, the entirety of *The Sea and the Mirror*) that we see Auden most delicately instantiating the idea that "orthodoxy is a reticence" – that to speak meaningfully about the truth of the self requires indirection, an indirection Auden achieves through loquacious hesitation. The passage contains hints of the religious, especially in the capitalization of "Word" and "Wholly Other Life," but Caliban cannot directly speculate on what these terms mean. What he gains is the ability to accurately describe his own situation "swaying out on the ultimate wind-whipped cornice that overhangs the unabiding void": if not quite living out over 70,000 fathoms, at least a state which resembles that uncertain life of faith. Accompanying this is the realization that "There is nothing to say. There never has been." Here Auden comes closest to directly stating that art should aim at silence – a stance he hints at in the Stage Manager's Prologue at the beginning of the poem, where the speaker declares that "All the rest is silence/On the other side of the wall;/And the silence ripeness,/And the ripeness all."[93]

Thus the paradox of Auden's late style: the more he desires silence, the more he must speak, to hide his true purpose from detection. To directly state the Kierkegaardian premises underneath – that each individual must make a choice and leap into faith or face a lifetime of despair – would be to destroy both the aesthetic value of the poem and the efficacy of the religious message. So Auden's Caliban must hide his plain pearl of wisdom under layers of verbal excess; the "contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch" that constitute the artistry of *The Sea and the Mirror* might be only "feebly figurative signs" but they are the best Auden as poet can procure. So he amplifies the artifice of his faux-Jamesian monolog: rattling off

[93] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 404.

interjections at a staccato clip, elevating his diction at key moments ("cornice," "incorrigible staginess," "contrived fissures"), and indulging in a tortuous, tortured syntax that even the master might find too fastidious. Still, there is the hope that their very fragility clears the ground for a direct encounter between the individual reader and religious truth. By showing the ultimate hollowness of his artistic creation, Auden hopes to convey something of the futility of all aesthetic creation.[94] By embracing the anti-Romantic conception of the aesthetic as merely one stage of life – and the lowest, at that – Auden points the reader (and, not least, himself) away from the temptations of genius and toward its limitations.[95] He hopes, ultimately, that "among the ruins and the bones" of empty aestheticism, the soul might find a reason to rejoice in something other than itself.

**Watching and Praying: Thomas, Kierkegaard, and the Simple Style**

> *When a mystification, a dialectical reduplication, is used in the service of a serious purpose, it will be so used as merely to obviate a misunderstanding, or an over-hasty understanding, whereas all the while the true explanation is at hand and ready to be found by him who honestly seeks it* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*[96]

If Auden sought to communicate to the individual reader the need for silence and reflection followed by definite choice by using outlandish verbal excess, R.S. Thomas pursued a very different poetic means of creating silence: a style stripped down to its barest essence. Critics of Thomas have long observed a shift in style, usually pointing to 1972's *H'm* as the turning point toward a simpler style, though in reality Thomas began working his way toward this style

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[94] Arguing that Caliban forms the template for all the subsequent speakers of Auden's late lyric poems, Lucy McDiarmid comments that "Every poem becomes an apology, undermining its own significance and alluding to the value it cannot contain" (*Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, 12). She later ties Caliban's speech to "'The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning'" (41).

[95] Jo-Anne Cappeluti offers the suggestion that "Caliban's address is a poem in which Auden is intentionally serving as his own subject. The poem records his journey into himself, into his consciousness, which means that Caliban, Ariel, the dead author, and the audience are all Auden" ("Making Nothing Happen: W.H. Auden's Romantic Legacy," *Renascence* 66, no. 1 [Winter 2014], 13).

[96] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 16.

in the 1960s.[97] These changes in style accompany a shift in theme, away from poems about the Welsh countryside and its inhabitants, and toward a more abstract, metaphysical reckoning with existence. The new poems also exhibit a marked distrust in language to convey meaning; just as the soul watching for God must be constantly on alert, so must the poet constantly adapt to language as it slips between their fingers. This second phase of Thomas's career also marks the start of his direct poetic engagement with the figure of Kierkegaard, though he had been reading him for twenty years already. Unsurprisingly, Thomas's poems about Kierkegaard bring together his various obsessions of the period – religious, aesthetic, and social – as Thomas uses Kierkegaard as a lens through which to view the struggles of the religious poet trying to reach an indifferent public with an impossible message.

These themes come together most vibrantly in Thomas's poem "S.K." Painting a portrait in miniature of Kierkegaard, Thomas simultaneously reflects on the nature of God, art, and the Public:

> Who were his teachers? He learned
> his anonymity from God himself,
>
> leaving his readers, as God
> leaves the reader in life's
>
> book to grope for the meaning
> that will be quicksilver in the hand…
>
> He was the first
> of the Surrealists, picturing
> our condition with the draughtsmanship
>
> of a Dali, but under
> a pseudonym always.
> The limpidity of his prose

[97] See J.D. Vicary, "Via Negativa," in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 89; Deane, Patrick, ""The Unmanageable Bone: Language in R.S. Thomas's Poetry," in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 202; and Kari, Daven M., "R.S. Thomas and the Dark Night of the Soul: Song, Suffering, and Silence in a Life of Faith," *Renascence* 60, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 108. J.P. Ward suggests four phases: 40s/50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s (*The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, 9).

had a cerebral gloss
prohibitive of transparence.
His laughter was that

of an author out of the asylum
of his genius. Imagining
from his emphasis on the self

that God is not other,
we are arrested by his shadow
in which the face of the beloved

is as a candle snuffed out
in the darkness following
on the mind's dazzling explosion…

The difficulty
with prayer is the exchange
of places between I and thou,
with silence as the answer
to an imagined request.
Is this the price genius
must pay, that from an emphasis
on the subjective only
soliloquy remains? Is prayer
not a glass that, beginning
in obscurity as his books
do, the longer we stare
into the clearer becomes
the reflection of a countenance
in it other than our own?[98]

Here we see the hallmarks of Thomas's late style in action: plentiful enjambment, shortness of line combined with close attention to verse form and shape, and a simplicity of language. All push toward a slowing down of the reading process. Enjambment, especially when it comes with such frequency, and with such short lines, creates gaps and hesitations that leave the reader uncertain not just about meaning, but about whether the poem will continue at all. Lines like

[98] Thomas, R.S., *Collected Later Poems,* 219-21.

"leaving his readers, as God/leaves the reader in life's/book" discombobulate the reader temporarily, forcing a pause, even a rereading, before the syntax becomes clear.[99]

The effect of Thomas's gaps gets amplified by both his short lines and his tight verses. The initial two-line stanzas fragment his portrait of Kierkegaard, only gradually lengthening to three-line stanzas, then finally to the long block of text in the final stanza. Such manic jumps fit the mood of the poem, which finds Thomas struggling to compare Kierkegaard to others: first Christ, then Yeats, then Dali are brought forth as analogs, but none perfectly reflect Kierkegaard's singular importance for Thomas. The exact meaning of this importance is itself elusive, "like quicksilver in the hand," since "The limpidity of his prose/had a cerebral gloss/prohibitive of transparence." Here again style fits content, as Thomas's sentence takes on the very form he attributes to Kierkegaard's prose: in some sense clear but obfuscated enough (here by Thomas's rare use of elevated diction) to remain resistant to straightforward explication. Crucially, Thomas connects Kierkegaard's anonymous methods, which enthrall the reader through their very indecipherability, to the methods of God, who remains shrouded enough in mystery to provoke the spiritual seeker to continued assays. Thomas too aims at this "anonymous" method, shearing his poetry of flashy markings, seeking to capture the reader's attention through its very simplicity.

Poetry is better suited for this mysterious mode than the main mode of communication in Thomas's other vocation of priest: the sermon. When Thomas writes about preaching in his poems, the effect is always chilling: he captures the inability of his sermons to communicate with

[99] Donald Davie sees in Thomas's "ruthless" enjambments "A tic, a mannerism… as if this sole device constitutes for him a prosody" ("R.S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church of Wales," 130). Patrick Deane reads Thomas's increased enjambment as a more organic development, a sign of Thomas's heightened worrying over language: "The pervasive use of enjambment produces in the reader a growing anxiety about the poem's continuation each line ending raises the possibility that the statement begun may trail off into silence… Speech has not come to anything" ("The Unmanageable Bone," 202).

his congregation, which seeks simple answers where he would submit complex questions. Poems like "H'm" and "The Conviction," play up the inevitable miscommunication which occurs when a preacher tries to communicate with a crowd about the nature of God. Poetry – like Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works – allows for a measure of personal contact between author and reader, such that some message may be communicated, however indirectly. In his poem "A Grave Unvisited," Thomas – after explaining that he has no interest in visiting Kierkegaard's grave, posthumously co-opted as a matter of national pride by Danes who would not heed the philosopher's call while he lived – asserts that for him, Kierkegaard has an almost bodily, living presence: "I go/Up and down with him in his books,/Hand and hand like a child/With its father, pausing to stare/As he did once at the mind's country."[100] Hand and hand, Kierkegaard leads Thomas on, like a good midwife, towards a deeper understanding of "the mind's country."

In the end, however, Kierkegaard proves most influential in his advocacy of silence. Thomas, like Kierkegaard, like Auden, embraced the paradox of writing while holding the notion that silence would be best of all. For Thomas, the silence that meets him in prayer is not cold comfort, but the very thing making possible a deeper understanding of God. In prayer, silence is "the answer to an imagined request," a lack of response that becomes a response as it strips away the longing for false comfort. Prayer illuminates God's presence, for Thomas, but to see the divine through this dark glass of mortality takes unflagging effort:

> Is prayer
> not a glass that, beginning
> in obscurity as his books
> do, the longer we stare
> into the clearer becomes
> the reflection of a countenance

[100] Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 183.

in it other than our own?[101]

Here again Kierkegaard emerges as a model: in reading Kierkegaard, one must assess and reassess to parse the obscurity – the same attention must be paid in prayer, as the one praying pores over the glass, scrutinizing it until the image of God appears, however fleetingly. Thomas once again marries form to function, his short, clipped lines, prolific use of enjambment, and convoluted syntax ("the longer we stare into/the clearer becomes") combining to create a compact, difficult to parse stanza that only gradually releases its meaning through repeated readings. If prayer is, as Thomas suggests in "A Bird's Prayer," "A trickle/of language gathering to a reservoir/to be drawn on by the thirsting/mind in its need for meaning," the same could be said of poetry, which slowly gathers its meanings in a pool into which the reader may look and gain insight.[102]

The actual silence of blank pages not being a viable option for a poet, Thomas seeks the next best thing, a condition next to silence. In the Credo section of his *Mass for Hard Times*, Thomas compares God's seemingly absolute silence to the reflection of that silence found in human restraint. Tellingly, he again invokes Kierkegaard's presence, suggesting that God adopts a Kierkegaardian view of the importance of indirect communication:

> Almighty
> pseudonym, grant me at last,
> as the token of my belief,
> such ability to remain
> silent, as is the nearest to a reflection
> of your silence to which
> the human looking-glass may attain.[103]

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[101] Ibid, 221.
[102] *Uncollected Poems*, ed. Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 175.
[103] Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, 137.

Like Kierkegaard, who paradoxically aspired to the condition of silence through his voluminous writings, Thomas senses the true vocation of the poet to be one of creating the possibility of silence. The almighty pseudonym, who comes to humans only in hints and guesses, indirectly, can be illuminated in part by the poet's repeated attempts to sit still, and create stillness for others. Kierkegaard, discussing silence in *The Present Age*, contrasts it to talkativeness: "Only someone who knows how to remain essentially silent can really talk – and act essentially. Silence is the essence of inwardness, of the inner life… some one who can really talk, because he knows how to remain silent, will… [talk] about one thing only."[104] Against talkativeness, a sure manifestation of the Public, with its surfeit of interest in meaningless trivialities and absence of attention to essentials, the poet must bring to bear a silence that nevertheless reserves the right to speak. The alternation of silence with speech comes across visually in Thomas's poems; the later he gets in his career, the more he experiments with empty space in lines. He does not, like another great priest poet, George Herbert, create discernible images with his staggered lines (unless you consider the layout of "Sea-watching" to be evocative of the motion of waves), but he uses empty space as a visual reminder of the silence to which his late poems point.[105] An excellent example of this comes in "Kneeling," a poem discussed above. As Thomas transitions from a description of the congregation waiting to hear his sermon to his inner thoughts to God, he includes a line break of great intensity:

> all that close throng
> Of spirits waiting, as I,
> For the message.
> Prompt me, God;
> But not yet.[106]

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[104] Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 69.
[105] For more on these "gaps" in Thomas's poetry, see Davis, *R.S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, 88.
[106] Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 199.

Thomas ushers the reader into this moment of tense expectation, of silent waiting. Our eyes wait along with his congregation, as Thomas struggles to share his message – but not yet. "The meaning is in the waiting," as "Kneeling's" last line suggests, and in the empty space of the poem the reader can participate in this act of waiting. The impatient reader may rush quickly over this gap, but the attentive reader – or the one at least open to having attentiveness developed in them – will pause and ponder the silence of the text.

**A Tale of Two Churches**

> *The aesthetical always overrates youth and this brief instant of eternity. It cannot reconcile itself to the seriousness of age, let alone the seriousness of eternity. Hence the aesthete is always suspicious of the religious person, supposing either that he never had any feeling for aesthetics, or else that essentially he would have preferred to remain in the enjoyment of it, but that time exercised its debilitating influence, and he became older and took refuge in religion* – Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*[107]

The desire of Auden and Thomas to foster silence in their poetry, in a sense to make their vocations obsolete through the act of performing them, opens up a new perspective on the place of both poetry and religion in the Anglo-American midcentury. On the one hand, this viewpoint held perhaps as dim a view as "Church Going" on the prospects of organized Christianity in the Western public sphere. On the other hand, Auden and Thomas suggested, the shrinking influence of Christianity on society need not bring with it only troubles; it could also provide opportunities for those forced to choose Christianity for themselves. Likewise, poets might have to abandon the dream of widespread public influence for the more attainable – and perhaps more significant – vocation of keeping alert those readers who wish to resist the homogenizing forces of the Public.[108] In this closing section, then, I want to suggest another way of reading the "negative

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[107] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 31.

[108] Speaking of Auden, as well as the late work of Eliot, Lucy McDiarmid concludes that the two "Entertain, and reject, the notion of a large public community united by art. The poet's true audience, susceptible to his attempts to save, is a remnant, a small group hewn from a larger one. While praising the few, the poets acknowledge the

space" of the empty church, one that diverges from Larkin's own reading. Against his vision of an echoing, empty place filled with the dead, I set Thomas's vision – illustrated in a number of poems about empty churches – of these abandoned spaces as sites where meaning can still be actively claimed by those willing to go out alone over the fathoms.

Throughout his long career, Thomas wrote poems in which the poet sits in an empty, or nearly empty, church. On certain occasions these poems do resemble Larkin's "Church Going," as in the poem "The Chapel," where Thomas contrasts the current state of an abandoned non-conformist chapel with the revivals that would once have been held within it.[109] More often, however, Thomas's empty churches act not as repositories for a decayed way of life, but as sites for present struggles of faith. The poem "In Church" presents a building as decrepit as the one Larkin explores. But instead of Larkin's bewilderment at the abandoned space, Thomas finds in it opportunity:

> These are the hard ribs
> Of a body that our prayers have failed
> To animate. Shadows advance
> From their corners to take possession
> Of places the light held
> For an hour. The bats resume
> Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
> Ceases. There is no other sound
> In the darkness but the sound of a man
> Breathing, testing his faith
> On emptiness, nailing his questions
> One by one to an untenanted cross.[110]

Though the building itself stands as a set of "hard ribs," devoid of the spark of life, it still provides a space for the individual to wrestle with faith and doubt. Indeed, such wrestling would

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existence of the many whom poetry can never 'save'" (*Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 62).

[109] See Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 276.

[110] Ibid, 180.

seem to be impossible in a more crowded church; here, the absence of any sound other than breathing allows the individual to "[test] his faith/On emptiness."[111] The empty void of the church building acts as a physical reminder of the 70,000 fathoms over which the individual lives a life of faith. As so often in Thomas's late style, enjambment runs rampant in this stanza, creating a particular sense of waiting. "Prayers have failed/To animate," "The uneasiness of the pews/Ceases," "The sound of a man/Breathing, testing his faith/On emptiness": these line breaks halt the reader's momentum, forcing a slowdown in interpretation. Just as the figure in the poem must nail his questions "one by one," so too must the reader take each line, each thought, as a separate consideration. Thomas again recreates the agonies of prayer in the experience of reading the poem, rendering the poem "indigestible" to the hasty reader, but full of sustenance for those willing to ruminate.

Finally, though, in the world of the indifferent Public, Thomas, like Auden, agrees with Kierkegaard: each individual must take responsibility for her or his own life. While Thomas does not turn poetry into solipsism, he seems aware of Yeats' dictum that poetry emerges from the poet's quarrel with himself. In one of his final collections, the suggestively titled *The Echoes Return Slow*, Thomas again finds himself contemplating the empty spaces of a church:

> The pretences are done with.
> The eavesdropper at the door
> is a fiction. The well-bred
>
> Amens to the formal
> orisons have begun to fade…

[111] Exploring the tension between Thomas's two vocations, Daniel Szabo notes that Thomas likely found the individual communication of the poem more amenable than the more public reach of the sermon: "The paradox of the public-private threshold for Thomas is that his public role as a priest is much less public than his supposedly more private role as a poet because of his surprising popularity. Yet as a poet he addresses one reader at a time as opposed to the collective audience present at church." ("R.S. Thomas: Poet of the Threshold," in *Intimate Exposure: Essays on the Public-Private Divide in British Poetry Since 1950*, ed. Emily Taylor Merriman and Adrian Grafe (London: McFarland & Co, 2010), 63.

Have I been brought here

to repent of my sermons,
to erect silence's stone over
my remains, and to learn

from the lichen's slowness
at work something of the slowness
of the illumination of the self?[112]

Combining his two vocations, Thomas contemplates what remains when belief has gone. "The eavesdropper" who might listen to Thomas's sermons has departed; the social benefits to embracing Christianity – the well-bred Amens – have gone. What remains is the poet and priest locked in conversation with himself and with God. As he repents his sermons – those direct attempts to convey religious truth – and erects silence like a gravestone over his body of work, he finds inspiration in the patient crawl of nature: as lichen breaks through stone, so the gradual worrying of the soul over its own mirror brings illumination, the sense of becoming a self that Kierkegaard's journey through the stages takes as its aim. Crowds may cease, publishers renege, churches empty, but just as Kierkegaard found comfort for his rejection by Denmark's elite, the poet finds solace in the inward silence of having lived his vocation through to the end.

[112] *Collected Later Poems,* 63.

# Epilog: Concluding Unscientific Postscript to This Dissertation – From the Maieutic to the Therapeutic in David Lodge's *Therapy*

> *The therapy of all therapies is not to attach oneself exclusively to any particular therapy, so that no illusion may survive of some end beyond an intensely private sense of well-being to be generated in the living of life itself. That a sense of well-being has become the end, rather than a by-product of striving after some superior communal end, announces a fundamental change of focus in the entire cast of our culture – toward a human condition about which there will be nothing further to say in terms of the old style of despair and hope. – Philip Rieff*[1]

Until now, this dissertation has traced Søren Kierkegaard's presence in mid-twentieth century literature through the concept of maieutic literature, that which aims to develop the single individual in an ethical or religious sense. The desire of the authors featured in the above chapters to employ literature as a means of communicating to, nurturing, and prodding individuals sprang in part from a series of midcentury crises: the crisis of war, the crisis of major shifts in religious practice, and the crisis of decline in an attentive audience for literature. For Huxley, Spark, Auden, and the other midcentury authors discussed in the body of this dissertation, Kierkegaard proved a useful resource for rethinking the role of literature in public life, and the relationship between author and reader. In this epilog I trace the decline of this midcentury understanding of Kierkegaard – one rooted in the notion of Kierkegaard as an important ethical, religious, and aesthetic author – and examine the rise of a new way of understanding Kierkegaard's message, an interpretation springing in part from the increased popularity of therapeutic practice. The most significant difference between the maieutic and therapeutic approaches to literature – at least insofar as the use of Kierkegaard is concerned – lies in their divergent approaches to crisis. While the midcentury authors sought to use crisis to

[1] *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 261.

provoke their readers into embracing ethical and religious development, the authors examined in this epilog see crisis as a situation to be mitigated through self-discovery – through the revelation, rather than the development, of the authentic self.[2]

David Lodge's 1995 novel *Therapy* serves as the main entry point to this new interpretation of Kierkegaard. Lodge has admitted that his driving preoccupation in writing the book was coming to terms with the prevalence of therapy in modern Britain.[3] The novel's sustained interest in the life and work of Kierkegaard, then, cannot be disentangled from this therapeutic framework. What makes Lodge's treatment of Kierkegaard interesting is that *Therapy* does not merely discuss details of Kierkegaard's life and writings; the book also imitates Kierkegaardian aesthetics in its use of multiply-authored texts woven into the main storyline, an homage to Kierkegaard's use of fictional authors in his early works. In both content and style, however, the novel interprets Kierkegaard as a therapeutic figure, one ready to diagnose problems and argue for the need for authenticity. To show that Lodge's reading of Kierkegaard is not eccentric, but symptomatic of an important interpretive shift, I will weave readings of two other texts into my consideration of *Therapy*. The first, expanding beyond the British Isles, comes from Jacques Derrida's late work *The Gift of Death*, in which the philosopher wrestles with Kierkegaard's ideas of sacrifice and the gap between ethical and religious duty. The second comes from an essay by contemporary British novelist Zadie Smith, who utilizes Kierkegaard in her *New Yorker* article "Some Notes on Attunement," to explain an

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[2] My analysis of therapeutic culture owes a great deal to the work of Philip Rieff, especially his seminal work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). For contemporary criticisms of therapeutic culture, see Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). For the turn toward ethics as a purely emotive exercise, see also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second Edition (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[3] "If the 1960s were about politics, the seventies about sex, and the eighties about money, then (it seemed to me) the nineties were about therapy. I decided to write a novel about this general subject – depression, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, and the diverse therapies we use to cope with these things" (David Lodge, "Kierkegaard for Special Purposes," in *Consciousness and the Novel* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], 270-1).

aesthetic "leap" she makes in her attitude toward the singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell. Though these two works differ from each other – and *Therapy* – in their emphases, Derrida and Smith make moves parallel to Lodge's by interpreting Kierkegaard as a figure of authenticity and self-actualization. Appropriately, both take as their central text *Fear and Trembling* – choices that highlight both that book's status as Kierkegaard's lasting literary legacy and the ways in which Kierkegaard's religious emphases can be pushed in decidedly non-religious directions.

*Therapy's* protagonist Tubby Passmore, recipient of a wide spectrum of different physical and psychological therapies, encounters the work of Kierkegaard just as he experiences a mid-life crisis that sees the breakup of his marriage and the frustration of his professional life as the writer of a hit sitcom. Despite his superficially happy marriage and his financial success as a television writer, Tubby finds himself chronically depressed. Tubby Passmore's journey in *Therapy* involves an interminable quest for the perfect therapy to cure his depression; he rotates from acupuncture to aromatherapy to cognitive behavioral therapy, but never finds the master key that will unlock contentment – until, that is, he discovers Kierkegaard. Driven by what he describes as an "internal derangement," Tubby finds in the works of Kierkegaard a voice for his own depression and sense of aimlessness. As he explores Kierkegaard's works, he simultaneously embarks on a series of failed romantic encounters, attempts to make up for the loss of sexual freedom he experienced during his long marriage. He experiences multiple embarrassing erotic failures: with a passing acquaintance, with an employee, even with a longstanding platonic friend. Finally he finds a sort of contentment after tracking down his first girlfriend, Maureen. Attempting to make up for the messy end of their relationship, he seeks her out to ask forgiveness, and ends the book by befriending Maureen and her husband, while also enjoying occasional extramarital encounters with her.

Throughout these various misadventures, Tubby feels the constant presence of Kierkegaard as a guide through life. But the Kierkegaard he encounters in his reading becomes not an aspirational figure but a reflective one, someone in history for Tubby to relate to. His fascination with Kierkegaard resides primarily at the level of the biographical: he sees in Kierkegaard's failed engagement to Regine Olsen an analog to his abandonment of his first girlfriend, Maureen, and views Kierkegaard's depression as stemming primarily from his unfortunate love – just as he feels he cannot escape his depression till he hunts down Maureen. Lodge confirms that he shares Tubby's views on this point, claiming of Kierkegaard that "Many of his books, perhaps most of them, can be traced back to this decisive act of indecision [his break with Regine], this perverse and self-punishing reversal of choice."[4]

Tubby's response, as he encounters Kierkegaard's life and writings, exists primarily at the level of affect, or the aesthetic stage of life, rather than the ethical or religious. His initial encounter with Kierkegaard happens as he looks Kierkegaard up in a biographical dictionary:

> I can't describe how I felt as I read the titles. If the hairs on the back of my neck were shorter, they would have lifted… they didn't sound like titles of philosophy books, they seemed to name my condition like arrows thudding into a target. Even the ones I couldn't understand, or guess at the contents of… seemed pregnant with hidden meaning designed especially for me.[5]

In some ways this account sounds remarkably like the ecstatic descriptions of encountering Kierkegaard recorded in wartime books like *The Midnight Hour*. Some key differences emerge on closer inspection, however; most significantly, the fact that what rouses Tubby's hackles is not the content of the books, but their titles. Though like Walter Lowrie Tubby feels that Kierkegaard speaks directly to him, his understanding of the impact is primarily diagnostic, as

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[4] Lodge, "Kierkegaard," 276.
[5] David Lodge, *Therapy* (New York: Viking, 1995), 64-5.

Kierkegaard "seemed to name my condition". Contrasted with Lowrie's assessment that Kierkegaard's words in *For Self-Examination*, which Lowrie considers aimed primarily at his own person, "Supply us with all the buffeting we can bear or profit by," Tubby's diagnostic use of Kierkegaard appears more comforting than discomfiting.[6] From the first mention of his name, Kierkegaard emerges in the pages of *Therapy* as another therapeutic resource for Tubby, useful insofar as he aids in diagnosing Tubby's "internal derangement".[7]

Zadie Smith, in her essay "Some Notes on Attunement," offers an appropriation of Kierkegaard similar to Lodge's in her emphasis on the affective and aesthetic aspects of Kierkegaard's work, an emphasis which lends itself to self-discovery rather than self-development. Smith centers the essay on her long resistance to the music of Joni Mitchell, a resistance which she overcame suddenly one day when Mitchell's songs finally breached her defenses. Though the essay winds its way through many points, Smith's central reading of this experience processes her "conversion" to Mitchell's music through the "Attunement" section found at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*. Comparing her sudden affinity for Mitchell to a leap of faith, Smith paints an aesthetic picture of what attunement looks like:

> With Joni, it was all so easy. In a sense, it took no time. Instantaneous. Involving no progressive change but, instead, a leap of faith. A sudden, unexpected attunement. Or a retuning from nothing, or from a negative, into something soaring and positive and sublime.[8]

"Soaring and positive and sublime": the aesthetic dream of transcendence linked with the therapeutic need for positivity. Smith admits that her linking "banal" aesthetic attunement of this

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[6] Lowrie, Walter, translator's preface to Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! and Three Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), vii.
[7] Bruce K. Martin agrees, sensing that Tubby "Increasingly takes pleasure in finding in such texts the terms with which to define and analyze his own feelings and in sensing an implied author who understands his pain" (*David Lodge* [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999], 159.
[8] "Some Notes on Attunement," *New Yorker* (December 7, 2012), *The New Yorker* website, accessed December 19, 2019.

sort to Kierkegaard's depiction of a "rare and precious" faith might prove insulting to sincerely religious people, but she presses forward with the comparison because she senses a basic resemblance between herself, making excuse after excuse for not liking Mitchell, and the figure described by Johannes de Silentio at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, who retells the story of Abraham and Isaac in several different ways, removing the offense of the paradox at the story's center to make Abraham's actions comprehensible. To take a leap of aesthetic faith, Smith must first reorient herself through attunement, a gradual stripping away of false alternatives, a *via negativa* that ends in acceptance of an absurd truth. That she takes this act to have value for more than just herself is apparent when she says that "If you want to effect a breach in that stolid edifice the human personality I think it helps to cultivate this Kierkegaardian sense of defenselessness… Put simply: you need to lower your defenses."[9] The end goal of Kierkegaardian practice, to Smith, namely the lowering of your defenses and making yourself vulnerable to beauty, resides squarely in the realm of the aesthetic.

This aesthetic goal has, in turn, a therapeutic effect. Whereas before Smith found Joni Mitchell grating and unintelligible, post-conversion she responds to the music with a purging of the emotions:

> This is the effect that listening to Joni Mitchell has on me these days: uncontrollable tears. An emotional overcoming, disconcertingly distant from happiness, more like joy—if joy is the recognition of an almost intolerable beauty. It's not a very civilized emotion… I can never guarantee that I'm going to be able to get through the song without being made transparent—to anybody and everything, to the whole world. A mortifying sense of porousness.[10]

What comes to the fore here is not a change in the will, or a leap to embrace the paradox of faith, but an aesthetic experience that pulls forth various strong emotions, an "emotional overcoming"

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

that does not lead to deliberate ethical or religious change, but to a series of attempts to recapture that same outflowing of emotions. Her mortifying sense of "porousness" – connected to her idea of making herself open through a lowering of her defenses – presses on her fear of being exposed as somehow inauthentic. What matters here is not ethical or religious development toward a higher stage of existence, but self-discovery aimed at greater authenticity, which Smith equates throughout the essay with the development of aesthetic taste.

*Therapy* similarly transforms Kierkegaard's ethical and religious concerns into aesthetic ones. For Lodge, as for Tubby, Kierkegaard cannot be taken at face value when he expresses a deep concern with the isolating anxiety of faith. Lodge instead transforms Kierkegaard's musings on unhappiness – primarily the "aesthetic" thoughts of A from *Either/Or* – into a set of meditations on living a full life moment by moment, a sort of *carpe diem* for the contemporary existentialist. Kierkegaard's life, then, was a failure insofar as he failed to put these mantras into practice:

> In particular I was impressed by Kierkegaard's insights into the subjectivity of happiness and unhappiness, into the perverse habits of unhappy hoping and unhappy remembering by which we rob ourselves of contentment and fail to enjoy each moment of life for what it is; and I was struck by the paradox that this man could see so clearly into these matters, and yet be so incapable of putting their lessons into practice in his own case.[11]

Lodge's approach suggests Kierkegaard as guru, holding insight into "contentment" wherein we "enjoy each moment of life for what it is" – a guru admittedly unable to improve his own life because of temperamental shortcomings. But Kierkegaard repeatedly suggests that contentment, to the extent that it springs from complacency, holds the individual back from true development. While the knight of faith possesses contentment, this contentment comes only through the

[11] Lodge, "Kierkegaard," 276.

greatest effort.[12] What Lodge has done here is interpret Kierkegaard not as a figure demanding difficult choices, but as a diagnostician capable of revealing habits that keep the individual from self-actualization.

To be fair to Lodge, he recognizes the limitations of his understanding of Kierkegaard, openly confessing his lack of expert knowledge. He admits that *Therapy* "Contains more about Kierkegaard than I know, because it contains several passages quoted from his writings, the full meaning of which has certainly eluded me," excusing his inexpert handling on the grounds that, "Since the whole novel is narrated by Tubby, it wouldn't matter if he misunderstood Kierkegaard, as long as he did so in an interesting and instructive way."[13] Tubby repeatedly emphasizes the limits of his comprehension of Kierkegaard's actual writing – limits set close in, given his unwillingness to wander through the thickets of Kierkegaard's prose searching for meaning. He barely engages with *The Concept of Anxiety*, finding its talk of sin off putting and its complex writing indecipherable, but he latches on to one particular chapter of the A section of *Either/Or*, "The Unhappiest Man," since as he reads it he feels once more as if Kierkegaard speaks directly to him.[14] This contrast is telling: the religious, difficult Kierkegaard who talks about the concept of sin in complex prose gets pushed aside in favor of the aesthetic Kierkegaard, who speaks of happiness and unhappiness with quasi-confessional intimacy.

Overall Tubby likens his experience reading Kierkegaard to "Flying through a heavy cloud. Every now and again there's a break and you get a brief, brilliantly lit view of the ground, and then you're back in the swirling grey mist again, with not a fucking clue where you are."[15]

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[12] "He is as free from cares as any ne'er-do-well, but every moment of his life he purchases his leisure at the highest price; for he makes not the least movement except by virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 51).
[13] Ibid, 269, 274.
[14] Lodge, *Therapy*, 87-9, 100.
[15] Ibid, 109.

This skimming method necessarily entails the shearing off of context, as Tubby picks out the bits that seem most directly relevant to his own unhappiness and skips the rest. Because, as Tubby admits, he himself tends toward an aesthetic approach to life, this means that he seeks out the writings written from the viewpoint of the aesthetic and takes them as expressions of complete thought, minus the important dialectical corrections offered by Kierkegaard's ethical and religious works.[16] He fails to understand that these works are not merely diagnostic of emotional states, useful primers for achieving greater authenticity. For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic works point ultimately to the need to leap out of the aesthetic into the ethical and religious stages.

In the absence of philosophical context, what fills in the gaps in Tubby's affinity for Kierkegaard is biographical detail. Tubby memorizes facts about Kierkegaard's life, fixating especially on his failed engagement to Regine Olsen. He sees the engagement's end as the key to Kierkegaard's writings, interpreting what he reads in light of Kierkegaard's putative inability to move past the relationship. Contrasting the early works with the later *Edifying Discourses* (which he finds "a turn-off"), Tubby offers a psychological/biographical reading of their importance: "The so-called pseudonymous works, especially the ones he wrote immediately after the break-up with Regine… are very different, and much more interesting: a kind of effort to come to terms with his experience, to accept the consequences of his own choices, by approaching the material obliquely."[17] He even compares the books to his own exercise, prescribed by his cognitive behavioral therapist, of writing monologues from the points of view of various acquaintances.

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[16] Ibid. Again, Lodge aligns himself with Tubby. He expresses a strong preference for "The early works rather than the later ones, the secular works rather than the religious ones, the pseudonymous books rather than the ones Kierkegaard published under his own name" (Lodge, "Kierkegaard," 276). Tubby makes the most references to *Either/Or* and *Repetition*, two of the most aesthetically-centered of Kierkegaard's books.
[17] Lodge, *Therapy*, 210.

Such a reading requires simplification, and Tubby condenses his understanding of Kierkegaard down into a *carpe diem* mantra. Musing on the meaning of repetition in the work of that name, Tubby concludes that "One meaning of it is the restoration of what seems to be lost… But another sense is the enjoyment of what you have. It's the same as living-in-the-present… It means being set free from the curse of unhappy hoping and unhappy remembering."[18] This unlikely assertion of "living-in-the-present" as the main ethical lesson on display in *Repetition* lines up with the general usage of Kierkegaard in *Therapy*. Tubby's reading of the works collapses the paradoxical thrust at the heart of each of them; instead of preserving the paradox, which compels the reader into ethical or religious action, he eases the paradoxical tension and extracts a straightforward piece of advice that promises contentment and self-actualization. The religious Kierkegaard, obsessed with how he might be saved, has been transformed into the psychological Kierkegaard, seeking only pleasure and a sense of well-being.

Because of this emphasis on well-being, Tubby, though he hovers on the edge of ethical living, ultimately makes no progression into the ethical; indeed, he arguably has become *less* ethical by novel's end. At the beginning he has a stable, faithful marriage, which he ends up sabotaging through his inability to accept his wife's love for him. After their separation, Tubby engages in a series of failed flings, including one with a voluptuous and willing underling at the television studio. Taking his assistant Samantha on a trip to Copenhagen (to research an intended television movie on Kierkegaard and Regine), he plans to sleep with her – an outcome she encourages in a bit of careerist sexual bargaining – but at the last moment he finds he cannot:

> I had the most extraordinary feeling that he was present somehow in the room, hovering at my shoulder… And when the beautiful Samantha shamelessly offered me all the delights of her sumptuous body, I couldn't take advantage of it. Something held me back, and it wasn't the fear of impotence, or of aggravating my knee injury. Call it

[18] Ibid, 127.

> conscience. Call it Kierkegaard. They have become one and the same thing. I think Kierkegaard is the thin man inside me that has been struggling to get out, and in Copenhagen he finally did.[19]

This moment should represent the conquering of the aesthetic by the ethical, with Kierkegaard providing a restraining force on Tubby, one which permanently changes his life. Instead of this choice constituting a true leap, however, it becomes a mere blip on the radar of Tubby's quest for authenticity. By book's end he has sought out his first girlfriend, Maureen. He ostensibly does this to apologize for his callous behavior years before, an act which would constitute a real ethical choice, but instead falls into a comfortable routine where he maintains his friendship with Maureen and her husband Bede while also frequently sleeping with Maureen without Bede's knowledge. Tubby feels no compunction about his act of adultery, confidently stating at book's end that "My own conscience is quite clear."[20] Given that Tubby had earlier conflated his own conscience with Kierkegaard's hovering spirit, he has clearly either abandoned Kierkegaard as patron, or somehow convinced himself that Kierkegaard would sign off on this act of deceit and adultery on the grounds that it gives pleasure to both Tubby and Maureen. The latter interpretation seems more likely, as Tubby has planned at novel's end another trip to Copenhagen, with Maureen and Bede in tow, to visit Kierkegaard's grave and the Bymusuem which houses his writing desk. The Kierkegaard who hovers in Tubby's conscience, then, concerns himself less with ethical or religious matters than with matters of authenticity: sleeping with Samantha would be wrong because the encounter rests on inauthentic feelings, but Tubby's affair with Maureen, based on genuine affection, can only be right.

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[19] Ibid, 209.
[20] Ibid, 321.

I interpret this ending as indicative of Lodge's reluctance to engage with the extreme demands of Kierkegaard's work in favor of a compromise – some unethical behavior, just not too much. Many commentators, including Lodge himself, have identified this push for compromise as a theme in his work.[21] In his willingness to dismiss unethical behavior when done in aid of authenticity, Lodge finds an unlikely parallel in Jacques Derrida, whose interpretation of Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death* centers largely around an attempt to excuse his own potentially unethical behavior. As a whole, the book finds Derrida struggling over the concepts of sacrifice and responsibility. Midway through he turns to *Fear and Trembling* to clarify the tensions between ethical duty and individuality. His close reading of Kierkegaard's text focuses at first on the notion of the impossibility of communication, a key theme in Johannes de Silentio's treatment of Abraham, and naturally one of interest to the pioneering figure of language deconstruction. Derrida hits on a quite profound reading of Abraham's inability to tell others what he must do. For Derrida, language itself annihilates the individual: "The first effect or destination of language therefore involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility… It is a very strange contract – both paradoxical and terrifying – that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy."[22] Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard: to break silence entails entering the world of the ethical and universal, a step the individual concerned with his or her own individuality cannot make.

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[21] "I think compromise must be part of my nature and temperament. I'm not a person who takes up extreme positions or lives at extremes of experience… I live a rather normal, conventional life in the mid- stream so my novels are inevitably rather mid-stream novels" ("David Lodge Interviewed by Chris Walsh," intro. and notes by William Baker, *PMLA* 130, no. 15 [2015]: 836). Cf. Perkins, *David Lodge*, 7.

[22] *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 60.

Derrida's insistence on the importance of silence in *Fear and Trembling* stems in part from his connecting the work to Paul's letter to the Philippians, wherein the apostle writes the words that give Kierkegaard's book its title: work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Derrida connects Paul's words to the notion of an absent God, one who demands obedience without reassurance. He finds this idea especially fruitful in Silentio's depiction of Abraham as a man who is "Sworn to secrecy because he is in secret."[23] Here the *magnum mysterium* of God as Other prohibits any positive speech about God's presence, or lack thereof. Derrida views this total separateness as a key component of the true practice of the three Abrahamic religions, which demand a confrontation with the reality that Abraham's sacrifice entails a paradoxical, simultaneous absolute hatred and absolute love for his son and family, a situation where "He hates them not out of hatred, of course, but out of love."[24] Derrida ties this paradox to the Kierkegaardian notion of the instant, that moment in time which, he argues, looks like madness to those outside, but forms the very kernel of faith. Out of all these moving parts, Derrida constitutes a theory of the importance of *irresponsibility* in the face of the demands of responsibility: the knight of faith cannot help but act irresponsibly in the eyes of the ethical world, driven as he or she is by a private impulse.

To this point Derrida has offered a traditional reading of Kierkegaard. Near the end of his essay, however, Derrida adds an interpretive twist to *Fear and Trembling*, one that reads Kierkegaard's work in a mode similar to Lodge. Pushing back against the universal ethical sense of responsibility, Derrida asserts that:

> What the knights of good conscience don't realize, is that 'the sacrifice of Isaac' illustrates… the most common and everyday experience of responsibility… The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable… what mystery could be more

[23] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 59.
[24] Ibid, 65.

> frightful… vis-à-vis love, humanity, the family, or morality? But isn't this also the most common thing? what the most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm? Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and ties me in my absolute singularity to the other as other… but of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice… I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others… I offer a gift of death, I betray, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity… By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher, writing and speaking in a public language… I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows… who are dying of starvation or sickness… thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my son, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day.[25]

To unpack the complexities of this passage would be impossible except at great length. Here I want simply to highlight how far Derrida diverges from Silentio's presentation of the figure of Abraham. For Silentio, Abraham's sacrifice *must* be beyond human reckoning, must present Abraham as a figure unutterably mysterious. Unless Abraham's sacrifice be absurd beyond understanding, his faith amounts to nothing. The point of readers grappling with Abraham, then, for Silentio, is to recognize their own inability, without faith, to attain such heights.[26]

For Derrida, though, Abraham becomes a sort of everyman, a symbol of a shared human experience that individuals confront every day. Like Tubby, then, Derrida views Kierkegaard as an author interested primarily in diagnosing, rather than developing, the individual: Abraham's

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[25] Ibid, 67-9.

[26] "Let us therefore either forget Abraham or learn to be terrified of the tremendous paradox which is the significance of his life, so that we may learn to understand that men can rejoice in our times, as in all other times, if they have faith. Unless the story of Abraham is a mere nothing, an illusion, a show and a pastime, it can never be a mistake for a sinner to want to do likewise, but it is necessary to find out how great was the deed which Abraham performed, in order that he should judge of himself whether he has the courage and the mission to do likewise" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Robert Payne [London: Oxford University Press, 1939], 73).

situation reflects the condition of the typical reader, rather than standing in judgement over it. In Derrida's pungent phrase, this "land of Moriah" forces the contemporary individual to make continual sacrifices, "gifts of death," in choosing one sphere of action over another. The vision Derrida presents, where each person owes the same debt to every other person, and to prefer one's closest relations to strangers across the globe involves a chosen act of violence, differs strongly from the Kierkegaardian account of Abraham, which relies on the presumed uniqueness of the father-son relation for its impact.[27] In view for Derrida seems to be the increasingly intertwined global stage of late twentieth century geopolitics, where "moralizing moralists" fill newspapers and television programs with the unrelenting, urgent message of "ethical or political responsibility."[28] Derrida pushes back against these moralizing moralists by recognizing the absurdity of trying to live a perfectly ethical life; even seemingly straightforward ethical decisions involve "sacrificing" the interests of the others, or the other others, around the world. For Derrida, the world of private decisions will inevitably involve "irresponsibility" that resembles Abraham's acts of faith.

In transforming Abraham from what Silentio calls a "witness" into a "teacher," a model to be followed rather than a scandal to be pondered,[29] Derrida also interprets *Fear and Trembling's* message as one of release from ethics. Viewed from one perspective, Derrida makes ethical choice much more difficult than it usually appears to be, since every decision involves sacrifice of one sort or another.[30] From another angle, however, Derrida's interpretation actually

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[27] "What is usually left out of the story of Abraham is dread; for I have no moral obligation towards money, but the father has the highest and most sacred obligation towards his son. Yet dread is a dangerous matter for the overdelicate: therefore they forget it, though they still want to discourse about Abraham" (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 31).
[28] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 67.
[29] See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 118.
[30] John D. Caputo takes this perspective in his essay "Instants, Secrets, and Singularities: Dealing Death in Kierkegaard and Derrida," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matuštík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 216-238. In this somewhat polemical essay, Caputo uses Derrida's

makes individual choice much easier: if every decision necessarily involves compromise, some "gift of death" to an other, then any decision might be equally justifiable as an act of "irresponsibility". If Derrida's choice to focus on academic philosophy at the expense of political activism carries the same degree of absurdity as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, then any choice might be justified as correct and courageous under the rubric of "irresponsibility." Derrida, in other words, begins to look indistinguishable from Tubby, even if his choice of academic philosophy comes across as more sophisticated than Tubby's quest for authentic sexual experience. Given the not infrequent criticisms leveled against deconstruction as a retreat from political engagement, Derrida's prescription takes on the air of therapeutic reassurance.[31] Abraham's impossible decision leads, then, not to the necessity of the leap, but the potential justification of any individual's choices.

For Tubby and Lodge, writing constitutes a main avenue for self-discovery and self-justification.[32] *Therapy* itself had its genesis in Lodge's own battles with depression, making the text an attempt at self-therapy.[33] Lodge chooses as one of the novel's epigrams the Graham Greene quote "Writing is a form of therapy," and Tubby echoes this sentiment throughout the book. Assessing the usefulness of his sitcom, Tubby points to its "therapeutic social effect,"

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reading of *Fear and Trembling* as an example of how deconstruction does not criticize ethics from the aesthetic perspective, but rather from the religious. As he argues, "Far from being unethical, anethical, or antiethical, deconstruction has to do with… exploring the fine tip of the ethical soul, analyzing the most delicate effects and reversibilities that infiltrate obligation and responsibility" (237). On one level Caputo is right, both in this particular argument and his broader point that critics of deconstruction rush to judgement without giving theorists their proper consideration. At the same time, Caputo's analysis of Derrida rather uncritically assumes Derrida is justified in his appropriation of Kierkegaard, without considering the ways in which this appropriation might make ethics easier, rather than more difficult.

[31] The world of postructuralism was infamously rocked by the revelation that Paul de Man had written anti-Semitic material for collaborationist newspapers during World War II. Long before this, Marxist critic Terry Eagleton had leveled the more general charge that high theory represented an academic retreat from politics after the difficulties of 1968 (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, *Second Ed.*, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], 123).

[32] Speaking of how writing *British Museum* helped him release his frustration at the Catholic prohibition against birth control, Lodge asserts that "I think one of the reasons most people write is to turn negative experience to positive account" ( "David Lodge Interviewed by Chris Walsh," 834).

[33] See Lodge, "Kierkegaard," 269-70.

since watching the "farcical trials and tribulations" of its characters allows the audience to feel better about their own predicaments.[34] Primarily, however, Tubby's focus rests on how the act of writing helps him, not others. Most significantly, therapy provides the motivating factor for the book's primary structural gambit, an homage to Kierkegaardian pseudonymity featuring the interpellation of texts "written" by those in Tubby's orbit, including his assistant Samantha, his platonic friend Amy, his estranged wife Susan, and his coworker Ollie. Comprising a good chunk of the novel's middle, these collected texts range in their form from a barroom conversation to a single-sided phone call, but all concern the assessment of Tubby's behavior by these different characters. Crucially, all come presented as straightforward instances of narration, steps toward a more objective view of Tubby's actions.

The novel provides a narrative jolt, then, when Tubby reveals that these interpellated texts are in fact the product of his own hand, an exercise in therapy prescribed by Alexandra, his cognitive behavioral therapist. Accounts of important plot events that have seemed distanced from Tubby's morbid introspection have actually come filtered through Tubby's use of what are, in fact, pseudonyms. Tubby makes clear the pseudonymous status of these authors when he explains that "Being the sort of writer I am, I couldn't just summarize other people's views of me, I had to let them speak their thoughts in their own voices".[35] Lodge, then, plays around with Kierkegaardian concepts not simply at the level of content, but through the very form of the novel. Known for his dabbling in meta-fiction, Lodge here gives his structural experimentation a Kierkegaardian cast.[36] But, motivated as they are by a therapeutic exercise, Tubby's pseudonyms differ radically from Kierkegaardian authors like Johannes de Silentio and Constantine

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[34] Lodge, *Therapy*, 104.
[35] Ibid, 212.
[36] For Lodge's metafictional tendencies, see especially Robert A. Morace, *The Dialogic Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

Constantius. The voices of Tubby's pseudonyms do not stand on their own, instantiating distinct worldviews; instead, they reveal Tubby's conception of how others see him. This is why, despite his insistence that they all speak in their own voices, Tubby's interlocutors circle back to the same themes again and again: Tubby's pretensions, his obsession with Kierkegaard, his domestic and sexual problems. The figures never become characters in their own right, any more than they would if Tubby had acted out their monologs in Alexandra's office as a form of role playing.

Moving Kierkegaard into the milieu of late century prosperity, Lodge offers a Kierkegaard acceptable to the citizens of a therapeutic society, one who challenges them to confront their depression and ennui, but in the service of greater self-actualization, not ethical or religious development. Here the intensely personal encounter with Kierkegaard experienced by his first Anglophone readers remains, but gets filtered through the marketplace of therapeutic remedies, the particularity of his ideas becoming obscured by a focus on the cathartic effect he has on the individual. Though Kierkegaard proves more effective than aromatherapy for Tubby, he is otherwise indistinguishable from it in his essence.

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It is especially fitting that this new interpretation of Kierkegaard emerges most fully in a novel written by Lodge, an author who in many ways embodies the shifting nature of religious belief in Britain over the second half of the century. Beginning his career as a devout, if conflicted, Roman Catholic, Lodge explored in early novels such as *The British Museum Is Falling Down* the tension between faithfulness to the Church's teaching (especially regarding contraception) and the desire to live a life of self-fulfillment. His provocatively titled 1980 novel *How Far Can You Go?* signaled a shift in attitude, as reluctant obedience to Church teaching gave way to private moral judgement and a sense of liberation from the restrictions of the old

way. By the time of *Therapy*, Lodge had begun to describe himself as an agnostic Catholic, retaining some remnants of his belief system, but approaching it in a decidedly piecemeal way. How far can you go? It's a question that lingers over Lodge's late work: how far can a Catholic go – both theologically and ethically – and remain Catholic? The question resonates aesthetically, too; critic Bernard Bergonzi, himself a lapsed Catholic and friend of Lodge's, nevertheless speculates that the "collapse of the Catholic world-picture," while relieving individual Catholics of anxiety, left behind "a shrunken world" where "religion seldom appears as a mode of transcendence or transformation".[37] Contrasting Lodge's novels with the tension-charged books of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, written when Catholicism seemed both more repressive and more distinct, Bergonzi finds Lodge's characters "decent and likeable" but also "a rather mediocre lot".[38]

Bergonzi senses a profound change – at the level of aesthetics – in the death of Catholicism as a binding set of what Rieff calls "interdicts."[39] When deprived of high stakes situations that require actual commitment, characters tend toward flatness and struggle to hold the reader's attention. Think of Pinkie from *Brighton Rock*: his awareness of his own impending damnation brings his actions into sharper focus, and his willingness to rebel makes him a compelling character.[40] For characters in the Catholic novels of Greene, or Waugh, or even a slightly later practitioner like Muriel Spark, the life of faith involves irreconcilable tensions, paradoxes which act as an internal propellant for religious characters. Deprived of this inner source of conflict, Lodge's characters resort to an endless variety of distractions, not unlike the

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[37] "A Conspicuous Absentee: The Decline & Fall of the Catholic Novel," *Encounter* Aug-Sep 1980: 56.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Rieff, "For the Last Time Psychology: Thoughts on the Therapeutic Twenty Years After," 110.
[40] Despite acknowledging Lodge's debt to Greene, J. Russell Perkins nonetheless argues that "Lodge has generally avoided the modernist vision of extremity that characterizes Greene's fiction" (*David Lodge and the Tradition of the Modern Novel* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014], 36).

method suggested by the Aesthete in the "Crop Rotation" section of *Either/Or*.[41] Because of this loss of tension Lodge's readers, no less than his characters, can expect only amusement and distraction – not confrontation or transformation – when reading a novel like *Therapy*, which reflects the reality of contemporary life without provoking readers to move beyond that life.

Then again, this desire for amusement fits naturally into the changed landscape of British religion. Norwich Cathedral's recent attempt to forestall plummeting attendance by installing a fifty-foot Helter-Skelter slide inside the church building offers a contemporary twist on Larkin's empty church: the house of worship as house of fun. "God is a tourist attraction… God wants to be attractive to us... for us to enjoy ourselves, each other and the world around us," said the Bishop of Lynn, delivering his dedicatory homily while seated halfway up the slide.[42] Whether one views this installation as innovative or sacrilegious, Norwich's fun slide stands as a particular monument to the upheaval of Christianity in Britain over the course of a century where religious belief in Britain was turned, for lack of a better phrase, helter-skelter. That even the churches themselves have adopted the language of entertainment and attraction shows how deep the underlying changes in British society have been.

By the 1990s, Larkin's vision of abandoned churches and a populace not so much opposed to religion as indifferent to and ignorant of it had largely come to pass.[43] The divide between belief in God and participation in religion denoted by Grace Davie as "believing without belonging" had reached a high point by the 1990s, when 2/3 of Britons still professed a belief in

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[41] See Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 234-51.
[42] "Norwich Cathedral: Bishop delivers sermon from helter-skelter," *BBC*, The *BBC* website (18 August 2019), accessed 21st December, 2019.
[43] See Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity: 1920-2000* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 602-629. Hastings notes both numerical and institutional decline: not only did membership in the Church of England decline by half between 1960 and 1985, over a thousand church buildings were made redundant in that period, peaking in 1976, when "one church was demolished every nine days" (602-3).

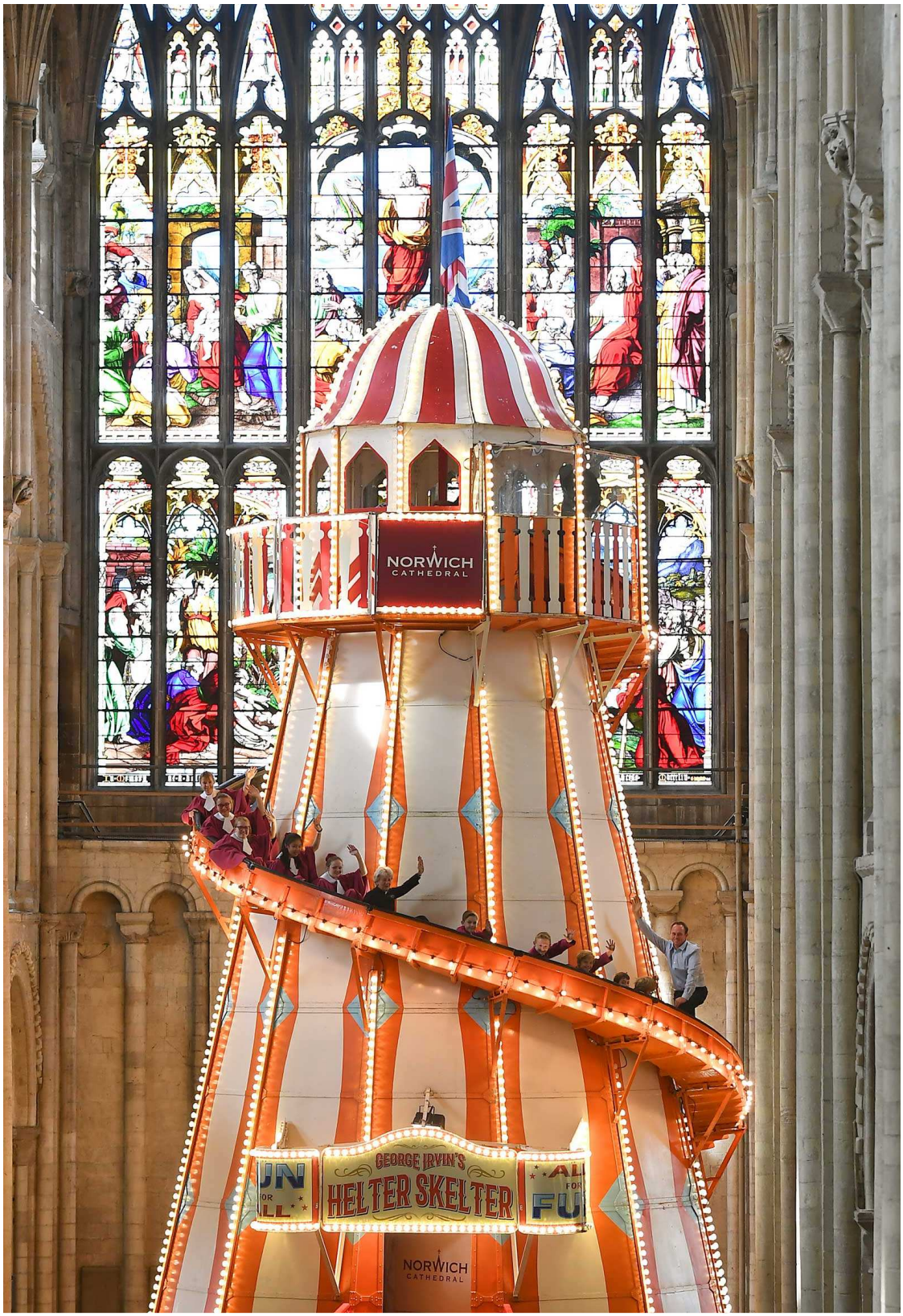

Figure 1. Church meets state (fair) at Norwich Cathedral. Photo by Joe Giddens/AP.

God, but only 15% regularly attended worship services.[44] This disassociation of belief and practice led gradually to an abandonment of Christian ethical norms, or what S.J.D. Green has provocatively dubbed the death of Puritanism in Britain.[45] The loss of a publicly shared ethics and a rise in private morality based in a sense of authenticity has made it that much harder for authors who wish to provoke and develop their readers into ethical change to convey their messages.

In Philip Rieff's analysis, the move from the social ideal of the saint (one without sin) to the "Everyman, twisting his neck uncomfortably inside the starched collar of culture" has opened up a literature devoted to "a symbolic act of going over to the side of the latest, and most original, individualist," resulting in "an endless ambiance of fun and boredom," a literature less aspirational and more anesthetic.[46] At the empirical level, Rieff's analysis of literary culture has been borne out by the dramatic rise in the popularity of what we might call the self-help memoir, as well as forms of auto-fiction, genres which stress authentic living and self-discovery, touchstones of therapeutic practice.[47] Ethically, contemporary memoirs push readers toward a discovery of the self, rather than a Kierkegaardian development of the self. Aesthetically, the intense personal revelation and self-discovery of the contemporary memoir stand in direct opposition to Kierkegaard's insistence on detachment, concealment, and indirectness.

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[44] *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 74. Davie notes that the decline in church participation should be seen in the context of a mass decline in civic and communal participation of all kinds (19-21).
[45] Green identifies three major attitudes affected by the death of Puritanism: public opinion regarding sex and divorce, regarding alcohol consumption, and regarding "Sabbath amusements," or the desacralizing of Sundays (*The Passing of Protestant England* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 141-5). He also argues that, historically, Puritan attitudes crumbled in part due to the emergence of the black market during World War II, as freedom became less associated with self-control, and more associated with the acquisition of goods (176-9).
[46] Rieff, The Triumph of the Therapeutic, 8-9, 12.
[47] For a fuller context of the rise in popularity of memoirs, see Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-7; 185-218; and Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 5-29; 243-271.

Despite conditions which would seem to make Kierkegaard's demanding message of personal development particularly unpalatable, interest in his works has survived in a Britain that has become increasingly disinterested in the strong religious and ethical elements of his writings. Here Zadie Smith's transformation of religious concepts into aesthetic ones helps make sense of Kierkegaard's lingering appeal. Early in "Some Notes on Attunement," Smith takes readers along with her to yet another empty church; indeed, the most famous empty holy site in all England: the abandoned monastery Tintern Abbey, where, echoing Wordsworth's famous epiphanies, she experiences her conversion to the Church of Joni. In describing the ruin's physical appearance, Smith employs imagery worth pausing over. Looking at the collapsed structure, she observes:

> Reduced to a Gothic skeleton, the abbey is penetrated by beauty from above and below, open to precisely those elements it had once hoped to frame for pious young men, as an object for their patient contemplation. But that form of holy concentration has now been gone longer than it was ever here… Roofless, floorless, glassless, "green to the very door"—now Tintern is forced to accept the holiness that is everywhere in everything.[48]

Like the Abbey, Smith finds herself penetrated by an aesthetic experience of "holiness" that she once tried to shut out. Her vision of lowering the defenses rests on her conception of "the holiness that is everywhere in everything" – the idea that, with the right mindset, any experience can carry with it a transformational charge of sublime emotion. But this very practice depends for its existence on the demise of another form of "holy concentration," the "patient contemplation" of the monks from ages past. Like Larkin in "Church Going," Smith has a complex, ambiguous response to this passing away of a mode of life. Smith retains even more strongly than Larkin the possibility of some sort of "holiness," even if it merely stems from the

[48] Smith, "Some Notes on Attunement."

transcendental beauty of a ruined monastery or a Joni Mitchell chorus.[49] This transformation of holiness, from a definite object acquired via "patient contemplation" to a nebulous beauty "everywhere in everything," helps explain why the idea of the leap keeps its allure for Smith. Though she cannot leap like Abraham to faith in God, she still feels something of the sensation of being out over seventy-thousand fathoms as she lowers her defenses and leaves herself open to beauty.

As the example of Smith shows, the rigorous demands of Kierkegaardian Christianity hold little appeal for contemporary appropriators of Kierkegaard, but they find themselves haunted by the very boldness and fierceness of that belief. If, as seems likely, Britain has decisively entered a phase that can be described as both post-Christian and post-secular, then Kierkegaard's place in such a society – if he is to have any at all – will likely entail a change in emphasis, away from *religious* individuality and toward quasi-religious *individuality*. Under such an interpretation, the specific religious content of Kierkegaard's writings will likely disappear, occluded by a more general appeal to the depth of his conviction.[50] While it is not surprising that thinkers should have their writings reinterpreted by those that come after, it is perhaps a little surprising that an author as thorny, difficult, and explicitly religious as Kierkegaard should continue to fascinate and challenge people who share few of his underlying convictions. Kierkegaard has shown himself a prophet, at least regarding his own critical fortunes. Writing in

[49] At the end of "Church Going" Larkin's speaker asserts that "Someone will forever be surprising/A hunger in himself to be more serious/And gravitating with it to this ground," which suggests that churches will retain their power over the imagination even when abandoned (*Collected Poems* [London: Faber and Faber, 2003], 35). Larkin, however, does not seem as convinced as Smith that some real "holiness" might exist, merely that humans will continue to feel the need "to be more serious."

[50] Smith's interpretation of Kierkegaardian attunement has taken on an interesting academic afterlife, as it has been adopted as a category by affect theorist Rita Felski, who finds Smith's account "especially generative" and has used Smith's essay as an example in many lectures (Francesco Giusti, "Passionate Affinities: A Conversation with Rita Felski," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 September 2019). Felski's forthcoming book *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, appears to develop her thoughts on attunement further.

his journal in 1847, when he seemed destined to fade into obscurity, he nonetheless had the confidence to make this prediction: "Therefore some day, not only my writings but my whole life, all the intriguing mystery of the machine will be studied and studied."[51] In this he has been proved correct; though reception of his work has shifted from an emphasis on its religious aspects to its aesthetic implications, people continue to study and study the intriguing mystery of the machine, drawn on perhaps less by the content of his writings than by the deep, obvious passion with which he committed his words to paper. Because of that passion, he remains for many who encounter him a writer not long dead, but one still living, impressed on the mind.

[51] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 224.

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