

An Epistolary Postscript to Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard: Letters and Documents, translated by Henrik Rosenmeier, with Introduction and Notes, *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. xxviii + 518 pp. \$22.50.*

THIS IS VOLUME XXV of the new and projected *Kierkegaard's Writings* of the Princeton University Press. Actually, it is the second in order of publication, the first being *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age, A Literary Review*. The whole series, twenty-six volumes, is under the direction of Howard V. Hong, who, with Edna H. Hong, translated the five volumes of *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Indiana University Press). Each volume, like the present one, will include an historical introduction, selections from Kierkegaard's journals and provisional manuscripts, notes, and an index. *Letters and Documents* itself contains a correspondence register, a chronology, a foreword by Howard and Edna Hong, a translator's preface, a list of members of Kierkegaard's immediate family, maps, and a bibliographical note.

This volume gives us the first English translation of all the known correspondence to and from Kierkegaard, including a number of letters in draft form, particularly those to Regine Olsen Schlegel and her husband. For those who are familiar with Walter Lowrie's *Kierkegaard*, there may be no surprises, for Lowrie had access to these letters and quotes from them. But the effect of being able to read all of them may well give one a firmer impression of that glimpse into Kierkegaard's character. It did so for me.

I do not know the reasons for this vast translation project, which will, of course, supersede the Oxford and Princeton translations of Walter Lowrie. For me the test will come with the publication (later this year?) of Volume XIX, *The Sickness unto Death*. The Lowrie translation of this most important book has always seemed to me unreadable. Because

I do not know Danish I have never known whether to blame Lowrie or Kierkegaard himself. We must remember that Kierkegaard had several quite different styles: novelistic, literary-critical, satirical, homiletic, journalistic, philosophical. Not every reader can be expected to like all of these, even when adequately translated. I confess a bias against several of these myself. In the case of his philosophical works, *The Concept of Dread* (now to be called *The Concept of Anxiety*), *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Sickness unto Death*, it has been customary to excuse Kierkegaard by saying that he was unable to free himself of the Hegelian dialectical manner even though he made fun of it. That may be so, and yet it will remain to be seen whether new translations will at least prevent one from gritting one's teeth throughout. I always felt that this style was too alien to Lowrie to handle properly.

Letters and Documents adds nothing to what we know about Kierkegaard's ideas, and his place in the history of modern philosophy and theology. He did not write about ideas to his family and friends. In fact, you would never have any notion that he was one of the most influential figures in the history of ideas if all you had was this volume. I do not, however, regard this fact as damning. On the other hand, the letters tell no secrets about his personality that you cannot surmise or know from the reading of his public writings. But in what he would have called a "qualitative" way, they do reinforce what we should know, that he was devious and self-protective in public while being obsessively single-minded in private. For this reason I have always considered the *Journals* the key to this man. What he did not say there, he either could not say because he did not know it, or did not say because he did not know that we, in the twentieth century, might consider it relevant.

I do not want to suggest that reading this volume can be an exciting experience, although it can be, in parts. It should be a pleasant and remunerative experience. There can be no doubt, for example, that Kierkegaard enjoyed writing to his nephews

and nieces, to his brother Peter's wife, but not to his brother. He had so little in common with the latter that he refused to see him when he was dying. His nephew Henrik Lund, on the other hand, understood his uncle's struggle with the Church well enough to make a Kierkegaardian scene on his behalf at his burial. It is apparent that Kierkegaard preferred to write letters to his relations and to his friends than to see them in person. He had more control over the relationship that way, and could be sure of not being put in a position where he would be pressed to give more of his inner life than he wished. Indeed, as communications most are unsatisfactory reading. They are circumlocutory, and, in spite of a certain deftness, often tiresome—as to my taste are the contrived romantic effusions of *Either-Or* and *Stages along Life's Way*.

The letters to the young pastor and friend, Emil Boesen, present a more complicated picture. It is clear, on the one hand, that Boesen admired Kierkegaard and was liked in turn. It is also clear that he was a committed pastor who had little sense of what his mentor was trying to do. He was with him at the end, but as friend, not pastor. On the other hand, Kierkegaard tried, shamelessly, to make use of him after he had run off to Berlin to put some distance between himself and Regine Olsen, and asked Boesen to spy on her for him. "Meet her without being observed. Your window can assist you." "So just write whenever you have an intelligence report." "But be careful. For my sake practice the art of controlling every expression, of being master of any situation, and of being able to make up a story instantaneously without apprehension and anxiety. Oh, one can fool people as much as one wants, as I know from experience." Finally, one notes that candidate Boesen whom he demanded attend him at home at such and such an hour was the same young man to whom alone he confided the assessment he was willing to make public—for posterity not for his contemporaries—of his broken engagement. A reading of letters nos. 49, 50, 54, 60, 62, & 68—especially the last two—written between October 1841

and February 1842, will reward anyone who reads this volume. But they must be read in between the earlier letters, while the engagement was still on, to Regine herself, nos. 15-46, and the final letters to Regine and her husband, Frederik Schlegel, nos. 235-39.

The letters to Regine are flowery and pedantic, not credible love letters at all. "I seem to need a lifetime to contemplate all the riches contained in your love," and so on. He put less effort in them than in the "Diary of the Seducer." He did not have to. He had overwhelmed the fourteen-year-old girl with his cleverness and his, comparative, maturity. It is possible to read them as the careless effusions of one who is sure of his position and wants to make the right noises. There is no hint—nor would one expect to find one—of the calculating complexity that is met in the letters to Emil Boesen. "If she had broken our engagement, my soul would soon have driven the plow of forgetfulness over her, and she would have served me as so many others." This raises the question that from here on in his letters cannot be forgotten: did not Regine Olsen serve him in various ways from beginning to end? Referring to "her righteousness, all her beauty, all her pain," does little to erase this doubt. For he immediately says, "Nothing so develops a human being as adhering to a plan in defiance of the whole world. Even though it were something evil, it would still serve to a high degree to develop a person." One thing consistent about Kierkegaard from his youth to his death was his interest in his own development.

These letters reveal his conspiratorial mind at work. Except in his attack on the Established Church, his mind never reached such intensity of conspiratorial fervor and subtlety. He keeps referring to the "plan" of his "inventive brain." "How subtly everything was planned." I appeal to the whole correspondence as justification for my suspicion that this man, who on his own account has admitted elsewhere that he had "no immediacy," used the beauty of this child and her crush on him as the basis for a vicarious experience of love, and, once it became obvious that the incompatibility was too

enormous, for a theatrical withdrawal, by design, to fortress Kierkegaard (Castle Suffering, later to be transformed into Christian Suffering for The Doctrine). "I know how to be consistent." "You [to Boesen] lack one thing which I possess: you have not learned to despise the world."

Let us take note of his protestation that "I did not intend to make her unhappy," that "I do not pride myself on deceiving a young girl." We should also note that he had previously admitted, "I have my painful moments when I regret that I became engaged, not that I broke the engagement, for only by virtue of the fact that I did become engaged to her did she gain any power over me. Had this not been the case, then my philosophy would soon have swept this actuality aside, however beautiful and interesting it was." A claim on him he could not live with; actualities and immediacy were always a threat unless they could be used.

He tells Emil Boesen that he has never told anyone of his motives, "how the whole business really fits together, but that "the time will come when I must drop the mask before the world as well." Did that time ever come? It was one thing to feel certain that a young girl could not understand his "enormously tempestuous life," his melancholy, his developing sense of mission against Christendom. There he was correct. It is another to believe that Kierkegaard himself ever understood his need to manipulate people. How vain—"I feel I am an exceptional lover. I also know I would be a bad husband." His notion of a lover was simply that of a seducer "capable of tempting a girl, of making an impression on her." What impression she made on him is harder to judge, from what he wrote to Emil Boesen or from his pseudonymous writings and the *Journal*. He had in the engagement and broken engagement a double cross to which he could refer all his innate sense of solitariness and mission for the rest of his life. What irony that he should patronize young Boesen by saying "You have feeling, I have passion." First, passion without feeling is not worth much. Second, Kierkegaard's lifelong passion was egotistical. "Born to intrigues,"

he "possessed . . . a passionate coldness."

From September to November, 1849, Kierkegaard wrote two drafts of a letter to Regine, and two drafts of a covering letter to her husband, and then shorter final letters to them both. Schlegel read his and returned Regine's unopened. You will see why. He hoped she would give him the chance to see and talk to her again. The letter that Schlegel actually read was inoffensive compared to the first drafts of the letters to Regine and Schlegel. The husband had obviously had enough of the barely disguised attention Kierkegaard had given to his wife in his pseudonymous writings. What was in Kierkegaard's mind Schlegel could know only by instinct and by having observed the man through his behavior. We, reading what he did not ever see, are hardly to be persuaded of the sincerity of Kierkegaard's glib confessions of cruelty and guilt, when he goes on to remind Regine that "neither I nor history will forget you." And to Schlegel, "In this life she belongs to you; in history she will stand by my side." Her life had "an extraordinary significance" because it was the "decisive moment of my life." He had made her unhappy, but through that he had become an author.

Why did he write them at all? I am not sure that he was not partly surprised by Schlegel's reaction. I think he wanted to ease his own conscience—I am not ready to say he had none—by giving her a chance to reconcile herself with him. Perhaps too he did not enjoy his "self-isolation" as much as his pursuit of it might suggest, and hoped to take the edge off it a little by a renewal of friendship. I do not convince myself, for I cannot believe him capable of any relationship that would not put him in a position to dominate.

It is a relief to turn from this to his letters to eminent friends in Copenhagen who sometimes accompanied him on his daily afternoon walks. In letter 150 to his brother Peter's wife, Henriette, he first speaks of the importance of walking.

Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I

have walked myself into my best thoughts; and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.

He must have said this to his friend J. L. A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge, a law professor, who refers to his “everlasting encomium on walking, which you have elevated to a veritable system, the culmination of which is that one can *walk* away from everything.” Kierkegaard did not walk to get somewhere, nor, like Thoreau did he “saunter” to observe. But “it all depends on having a fixed point from which to set out.” When, in another letter to Kolderup-Rosenvinge, he speaks of walking as “an emblem of spiritual activity,” one can see in about as simple a manner as it is possible to see Kierkegaard a man who spent his life walking away from (rejecting) people, historical developments, ideas, his own fullest self-understanding, and yet proceeded from a sure vision of what life should be like and always returned to it, day after day, until he collapsed in the street.

Reviewed by RALPH HARPER