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The Breaking Point: 180 Years After the Turn in Søren Kierkegaard's Work

El punto de quiebre. A 180 años del giro en la obra de Søren Kierkegaard

O ponto de viragem. 180 anos da reviravolta na obra de Søren Kierkegaard

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In mid-December 1845, Søren Kierkegaard submitted for publication a manuscript titled *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to “Philosophical Fragments”. In fact, the text was written as a continuation of previous work. The difference was that the earlier work was a little over 80 pages long, whereas the latter had more than 500. Another characteristic worth noting in the *Postscript* is its conclusive nature. Kierkegaard was considering giving up writing and moving to a rural parish. On February 7, 1846, he wrote in one of his journals: “My idea is now to qualify myself for priesthood. For several months I have prayed to God to help me along, for it has long been clear to me that I ought not to continue as an author [...]. That’s also why I haven’t begun anything new while doing the proof-reading [of the *Postscript*], except for the little review of *Two Ages*, which is, once more, concluding.”¹ The *Postscript* was published on February 27 and, a little over a month later, on March 30, the review was also published. And yet, Kierkegaard did not abandon his work as an author.

It is hard to imagine Kierkegaard as a priest if we consider the well-known controversial position he took against the Church of Denmark toward the end of his life. This was far from a descent into madness preceding his death from exhaustion. Rather, we can identify a turn in Kierkegaard’s work that culminates in a challenge to the ecclesiastical-political order. This break—motivated by the public feud Kierkegaard had with the satirical newspaper *The Corsair*—became definitive in 1846 with the publication of the *Postscript* and the literary review. On January 24, 1847, Kierkegaard wrote in his journals: “God be praised that all the attacks of vulgarity came over me. Now I have truly had the time to learn inwardly and to make certain that it was indeed a melancholy idea to want to live out in a rural parsonage in order to do penance in seclusion and oblivion. Now I am standing right here at my post with greater resolve than ever.”² He returned to the same topic on October 13, 1853, two years before his death: “With every new book I thought: I must stop here. I felt it particularly with the *Postscript*. At that moment, I wanted to stop—then I wrote about *The Corsair*. From that moment on, my idea of what it meant to be a writer changed. I began to believe that I had to continue for as long as I could.”³

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 2, *Journals EE–KK*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 257. This entry corresponds to JJ:415.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 4, *Journals NB–NB5*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 85. This entry corresponds to NB:114.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 9, *Journals NB31–NB36*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 260. This entry corresponds to NB28:54.

On June 13, 1844, Kierkegaard published *Philosophical Fragments*. His name appeared as editor for fictitious writer Johannes Climacus. Toward the end of this brief work—which is dedicated to the shift in paradigm from the Socratic to the Christian conception of truth—the pseudonym reflects on the future of his project: “[...] in the next section of this piece, if I ever do write such a section, it is my intention to call the whole by its right name, and to clothe the problem in its historical costume.”⁴ That is precisely what he does in the *Postscript*, though only in a small part of the hefty volume. The remainder of the volume discusses the subjective nature of Christianity. In contrast to the scientific model and to speculative inquiry disconnected from existence, Christian existence is grounded in the communication of a truth that must be lived. For this reason, and not because of any relativistic tendency, it is subjective. Within this framework, a somewhat greater degree of systematization finally appears in Kierkegaard’s thinking, even though he often criticized the systematic impulse that is characteristic of modernity. In the *Postscript*—which retains the pseudonym as author and Kierkegaard as editor—existence is divided into three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The “progression” from one stage to another cannot be understood as a gradual sequence; it is shown as a qualitative change. In this leap, a reappropriation of the previous stage takes place, but from a new horizon. Thus, the fragmented temporality that governs existence in the aesthetic stage is resigned through the continuity introduced by duty in ethical consciousness. Likewise, ethics is in turn reconfigured with the introduction of the Christian paradox, which affirms the possibility of a relationship between the individual subject and God.

Something that may be overlooked when focusing exclusively on the distinctly religious-existential approach of the *Postscript* is that it also entails a critique of the absence of ethics into which excessively reflective modernity has fallen. Although Kierkegaard’s disagreements with Hegel have often been misread, as recent specialized literature shows, we nevertheless find Johannes Climacus explicitly describing the Hegelian system as follows: “[...] the Hegelian system in absentmindedness goes ahead and becomes a system of existence, and what is more, is finished—without having an

4 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton University Press, 1962), 137. For references to Kierkegaard’s collected works in Danish (*Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*), we will use the abbreviation *SKS*, followed by the volume and page number. In the case of this note, the reference would therefore appear as follows: *SKS* 4, 305.

ethics (the very home of existence).”⁵ What is lost is the moral disposition that understands life itself as a responsibility to be assumed by each person in every situation. This commitment is replaced by an abstraction satisfied with an extensive knowledge of reality, without leaving room for existential rootedness. If the stages are preserved through the qualitative leap, and the first ethical consciousness is necessary to open the individual to the religious sphere, then the full realization of Christianity would be at risk without the notion of existential commitment. Thus, Johannes Climacus concludes: “[...] it finally became clear to me that the deviation of speculative thought and, based thereupon, its presumed right to reduce faith to a factor might not be something accidental, but might be located far deeper in the orientation of the whole age—most likely in this, that because of much knowledge people have entirely forgotten what it means to *exist* and what *inwardness* is.”⁶

We can see this critical stance toward modernity fully expressed in the brief review that Kierkegaard had intended as the definitive closure of his career as a writer. In 1845, Thomasine Gyllembourg published a novel titled *Two Ages*. She had previously published a collection of works anonymously, listing her son, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, as editor. Heiberg, in turn, was one of the most prominent representatives of Hegelianism in Denmark and had been a model for Kierkegaard in his youth. Kierkegaard sought Heiberg’s approval but never obtained it. In *Two Ages*, Gyllembourg presents a contrast between the “age of revolution” (from the late 18th century to the early 19th) and the “present age,” which is more stable and bourgeois. This attracted Kierkegaard’s attention to such an extent that his review exceeded one hundred pages. Since Gyllembourg’s novel was not translated into either German or English, the reception history of Kierkegaard’s review outside Denmark was unusual. What was done was to select just one part: the second section of the final chapter. This section, titled “The Present Age,” is largely an independent reflection by Kierkegaard—though clearly influenced by the novel—on the vices of an excessively reflective modernity. A similar selective process occurred in Spanish. Although a first complete version of the review was published in 2022,⁷ the section that continues to attract attention is the one that circulated independently as an influential offprint.

5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), 121. *SKS* 7, 118.

6 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), 242. *SKS* 7, 220. Italics in the original.

7 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Una recensión literaria*, ed. Leonardo Rodríguez Duplá (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2022).

According to Kierkegaard, the present age —disrupted by bourgeois liberalism and aristocratic conservatism— “is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*”⁸ This displaces the existential decision, as explained above with regard to the *Postscript*, replacing it with the reassuring security provided by reflective anticipation. As a result, life loses its elasticity, unfolding in abstraction rather than within a concrete domain that constantly tensions life projects. Abstraction ultimately erases the figure of the individual responsible for his or her own choices. This erasure makes possible a modern phenomenon of which Kierkegaard himself was a victim: the public. The public is nobody and everybody at once—an undifferentiated mass that appears to hold opinions but becomes untouchable when responsibility must be assigned. Individual duties become blurred when the public emerges and attacks through the press, the medium through which modernity gives expression to this new formation. Within the public, what prevails is the leveling of differences, a characteristic feature of speculation, whereby exceptions are punished. In this way, leveling envy restrains those who attempt to stand out.

In 2026, marking the 180th anniversary of the publication of the *Postscript* and the literary review, we believe it is important to emphasize—from a Spanish-speaking scholarly perspective—the role of these texts within the complex structure of Kierkegaard’s work. So far, we have focused on the critical side, but it is just as important to consider the possibilities Kierkegaard’s critique brings out, and the perspective it offers on the present. This *dossier* includes six articles, all authored by distinguished Kierkegaard scholars, and they seek to shed light on the two works that constitute a turning point in Kierkegaard’s thought.

In *The Extent of Madness*, Ángel Viñas Vera draws from the *Postscript* and examines madness not as a medical or psychiatric phenomenon, but as an essentially spiritual and philosophical category. According to the study, in Kierkegaard’s work, madness is bound up with inwardness, understood as the anthropological structure that defines the human being. The analysis distinguishes between two fundamental forms of madness: the delirium of inwardness, in which the subject’s passion is mistakenly fixed upon a finite object, and the absence of inwardness or objective madness. The latter is described as a form of repetitive or parroted madness, in which the

8 Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages. The Age of Revolution and The Present Age. A Literary Review*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1978), 68. *SKS* 8, 66. Italics in the original.

individual reiterates universal truths and scientific results without any personal appropriation or genuine existential engagement with what is being said. The study points out that this form of objective madness reflects an alienated individual who has lost their identity by becoming a mere artificial product of the dominant culture. From this perspective, historical truth and an intellectual approach to Christianity are insufficient unless they are realized through a person's personal passion and radical uncertainty. The article concludes that madness is a universal human possibility that illuminates the crisis of a world that has forgotten what it means to exist and labels as mad those who seek to live out their faith with infinite passion.

In line with the review of *Two Ages*, Nassim Bravo's article titled *Kierkegaard's Critique of the Liberal Press in 1835-1836: The Debate with Ostermann, Lehmann, and Hage* explores the background to Kierkegaard's polemical stance toward the press. Bravo shows that Kierkegaard's hostility was not a late outburst but has its roots in the early development of his existential thought during his formative years. The analysis focuses on writings from 1835 and 1836, in which Kierkegaard criticizes the tendency of the liberal press to import foreign political models—such as the French—without regard for their organic compatibility with Danish tradition and national character. Bravo highlights that the young Kierkegaard already identified the phenomenon of *leveling*, a process driven by the press that effaces individual singularity and reduces it to a *faceless crowd*. In Kierkegaard's view, true reform should not be merely political or external, but grounded in the individual's artistic, philosophical, and spiritual development. Bravo concludes that this early journalistic polemic reveals a thinker deeply concerned with authenticity and passion, denouncing the *cowardice and half-heartedness* of reformers who, shielded by the anonymity of the press, sought to impose a political form on a conception of life not yet matured among the people.

The study titled *The Contemporary Socio-Political Danger and Its Ethico-Religious Corrective: A Reading of Søren Kierkegaard's A Literary Review*, by Ángel Garrido Maturano, reconstructs Kierkegaard's analysis of historical periods and uses it as a lens through which to examine the crisis of contemporary society. Garrido Maturano characterizes our age as a dangerous fusion of revolutionary passion and calculating reflection, resulting in a *passionately reflective* society. In this context, individualism becomes a form of self-interested advocacy oriented toward success and the mastery of means such as money and technology, paradoxically leading to the homogenization of human beings under the logic of the market. As an ethico-religious corrective, the study

proposes retrieving the category of the *single individual before God*, which entails a passionate commitment to absolute good in the face of the leveling effects of social media and the dominance of the public sphere. This corrective suggests that true equality does not arise from homogenization, but from justice understood as a harmony of particularities, wherein each individual assumes responsibility for their own spirit. Garrido Maturano concludes that only through a *love that does not seek its own* is it possible to transform social relations and confront the spiritual corruption that characterizes the present.

Similarly, and within the framework of cultural critique, Manfred Svensson's article titled *Intellectual Freedom, Individuality, and Collective Deception. Mill, Tocqueville, Kierkegaard, and the Earliest Cancel Culture* defends a conception of intellectual freedom grounded in a diagnosis of the age that transcends traditional Enlightenment commitments. Svensson examines how John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Kierkegaard confronted the rise of public opinion as a new form of tyranny in the mid-19th century. While Mill places his confidence in debate as a means of strengthening truth, and Tocqueville draws attention to a tyranny that *penetrates the soul* through social exclusion, Kierkegaard demonstrates a profound understanding of the problem of self-deception and *collective illusion*. Svensson emphasizes that, for Kierkegaard, freedom of discussion is insufficient unless it is coupled with a struggle against the anonymity of the *public*—that impersonal abstraction which dissolves individual responsibility. The article suggests that contemporary *cancel culture* can be understood through Kierkegaard's suspicion of chatter and leveling, proposing indirect communication as a necessary means of dispelling errors in which society is invested. Svensson concludes that intellectual freedom requires not only tolerance but also an active resistance to homogenization and a deep commitment to one's own inwardness.

Going back to the *Postscript*, the article titled *Subjectivity Is the Error: Soren Kierkegaard and Markus Gabriel in Neo-Existential Dialogue*, by María José Binetti, brings into dialogue the thesis that *subjectivity is truth* and Gabriel's contemporary claim regarding the subject's radical fallibility. The paper argues that both positions converge in an ontology of freedom in which the possibility of error, guilt, and self-deception constitutes structural determinations of an incomplete existence. Binetti grounds this dialogue in Schelling's concept of *Potenz*, arguing that the subject is free precisely because it both can and cannot be at once, thereby situating it in a condition of uncertainty and constant becoming. The study describes subjectivity as an *ontological incompleteness* traversed by transfinity: the individual never

fully coincides with their own power and must constantly decide between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Spirit is defined here as a self-relational, negative structure that produces culture and history through the self-activity of thought. Binetti concludes that subjective truth is the *capacity to be oneself*, attainable only by acknowledging that error is the root of the refusal to will one's own possible self, thereby confirming that fallibility is the necessary counterpart of absolute freedom.

To conclude, tracing the distinction and the claim of the ethical back to the earliest stages of Kierkegaard's work, Óscar Parcero's article titled *Neither/Nor* examines the 1843 work *Either/Or* in order to unravel the complex *game of deceptions* and the *secret* that structure the beginning of Kierkegaard's activity as a writer and, in this early phase, lead to the *Postscript* and the literary review. The author argues that, beyond the apparent opposition between the aesthetic and the ethical, the book functions as an ironic device that leads the reader into a kind of *disorientation* or borderline situation that equally undermines the value of both spheres. Through an analysis of *Ultimatum*—also discussed by Binetti—and of the text's rhetorical dimension, the article shows that the religious should not be understood as a mere culmination of ethical development, but rather as an alterity that radically reconfigures existence. It places the individual before their own nothingness, thereby opening the possibility of an authentic and responsible life.

We hope that readers of this dossier will benefit from the specialized research on Kierkegaard and two works that are fundamental to the development of his thought. At the same time, we are motivated by the opportunity to bring key Kierkegaardian notions into contemporary debate. The six articles collected here address issues such as individuality, religious experience, cultural structures, social vices, and the challenges of intersubjective organization. Together, these dimensions call for careful attention, and Kierkegaard offers valuable resources for reflecting on them.

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