

# Essays in Philosophy

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## Book Review

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*Written Images: Søren Kierkegaard's Journals, Notebooks, Booklets, Sheets, Scraps, and Slips of Paper*, by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, and Johnny Kondrup. Translated by Bruce H. Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, Preface, illustrations. 180pp. ISBN 0-691-11555-9, \$45.00.

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Søren Kierkegaard is the preeminent nineteenth century philosopher of fragments, a fact that has made him particularly important for several strands of philosophical resistance to “total” philosophies that left indelible marks on the twentieth century and continue to reverberate in the twenty-first. It is most appropriate to devote substantial attention to the fragments he left, including the “journals, notebooks, booklets, sheets, scraps, and slips of paper” that are the objects of this study, which originally appeared in Danish (as *Skriftbilleder*) in 1996. The authors write that their intention is “to recount the story of the peculiar fate that lay in store for Søren Kierkegaard’s literary remains when they fell into the hands of a small group of men who, in an effort characterized by roughly equal portions of good will and ignorance, took upon themselves the task of publishing the most important portions of that material” (7). And it is a story engagingly told—certainly reason enough for anyone interested in Kierkegaard to read it, probably also reason enough for others interested more generally in literary remains and their fates.

It is entirely appropriate that the story should revolve around the vagabond existence “of packets and sacks of paper covered with writing” that go from “a couple of apartments in Copenhagen” to “a bishop’s residence in northern Jutland” and then to “the Royal Danish Library, where they are today guarded with the greatest of care” (7). As a public figure (and from the moment she or he publishes, a writer is a public figure), Kierkegaard lived in his fragmented work and efforts composed of “portions of good will and ignorance” (whether *equal* is a subject for argument) to organize it. The efforts begin with Kierkegaard himself and his (appropriately) *ex post facto* *Point of View*. He did not speak with one voice, and every attempt to find a voice among the many voices that is the sole authentic voice of Kierkegaard looks like crowd control. Crowd control comes into play when a crowd is not only out of hand but also large enough or loud enough to pose a threat to the possessor of the hand it is out of. How predictable at the beginning of the twenty-first century that a vagabond crowd should end up under guard in a royal library! This is not a “peculiar” fate so much as it is a *paradoxical* one, and part of Kierkegaard’s continuing relevance as a writer derives from the extent to which such paradoxes have become commonplace. There is no need for a puppet master or an evil genius: demons that make the whole age laugh and forget that it is laughing at itself are sports of nature that spring up like weeds in unexpected places—with or without sophisticated herbicides or crowd control.

And that is the beauty of this little book, in which we can catch a glimpse of the fragments, though we cannot get past the guards.

The story begins shortly after Kierkegaard's burial with the designation of an heir, Regine Schlegel (née Olsen), who had no interest in the inheritance (except for "the few items that were of personal concern to her," 9) and the seizure of power over that inheritance by Henrik Lund, who spoke (like Kierkegaard's other literary creations) without authority, but spoke nonetheless. There is delicious irony in the fact that Kierkegaard would assure Regine that it is *all* of personal concern to her, that the one who is granted authority does not speak while the one who speaks is not granted authority. The authors of this volume note in passing that Lund (who was Kierkegaard's nephew) based his authority in the matter of publication "on the argument that Kierkegaard, by ironically expressing the opposite view, had made him his literary executor" (9). Kierkegaard's literary remains effectively create a new character in the seizure--and his authority derives entirely from the act of seizing it. Our access to Kierkegaard's literary remains is necessarily mediated by Henrik Lund, who had first access to them after his death. This raises fascinating questions about secondhandedness that are of philosophical interest in any consideration of Kierkegaard. We necessarily encounter the *remains* secondhand and depend on a series of archivists stretching from Lund to current staff of the Royal Danish Library (and the authors of this book) for access. But how do we encounter Kierkegaard and his work? The question hinges on whether we are approaching a corpse or a project with a life of its own--a critical moment in Kierkegaard's work as a kind of poet. History is lived forward but understood backward, so the question is which way we are turned when we encounter the scraps of Kierkegaard's work.

The authors of this volume are careful chroniclers, so we can watch the remains move from Lund's hands, to P.C. Kierkegaard's residence in Aalberg, to the Royal Danish Library. And we can watch the succession of editors in a series of cautionary tales for archivists, redactors, and researchers tempted to "correct" the work of predecessors and put it in order before letting it go public. It is telling that the head librarian at the Royal Danish Library refused four of Kierkegaard's books with his own annotations in 1856 "for fear that too many people would want to take a look at them" (19). The trajectory of Kierkegaard's scraps, some of which were intended for publication, some not, was shaped by a succession of editors but also by a concern with keeping the crowds that formed around them in their places. Crowd control is about containment more than size, and, in looking back at Kierkegaard's work, it is good to be reminded of this. Kierkegaard has too often been read as a radical individualist and a philosopher of will. But this narrative points to work that is profoundly social, shaped by forces beyond the individual, passion, not action.

This is true even apart from the heavy-handed treatment of the remains that will make contemporary archivists shudder and should make contemporary editors think carefully about their role in the process of publication.

The authors are to be commended for never forgetting that Kierkegaard was a maker of images--and moving ones at that. The many illustrations provide graphic evidence in the form of doodles, sketches, and complex revisions as well as handwriting that changes almost as dramatically as the characters Kierkegaard made to write his books. Illustrations included in this volume provide visual evidence of the close connection between writing and speaking, between both and seeing, that breathed life into Kierkegaard's work. He was about writing images that are as lively now as when they were created--meaning that we do not (or do not need to) encounter them at second hand. This is true of individual characters as well as the whole body of work, and it is an interesting commentary on the plan of Kierkegaard's work. Even if he created the pseudonyms and the works they wrote as part of a grand scheme conceived beforehand like the one he sketches in the *Point of View*, to the extent that he created

real characters, we can rest assured that they had schemes of their own. These schemes, thoroughly out of hand in the hands of an ironist who could rival Plato's Socrates, make Kierkegaard's assurance to Brøchner (176) that there was a place in which to begin his writing career now that Kierkegaard is finished (in 1850) a *permanent* jest. It is about place, but place depends precisely on *not* being finished: not clinging to the edge of a System like Hegel's, but celebrating the unruly fragments at the very heart of ordinary existence.

This is a book that will interest not only students of Kierkegaard but also readers concerned with the way books are made--processes of vision and revision as well as redaction and preservation. It is a lively commentary, too, on authorial voice, siding with Kierkegaard on the multiplicity of that fiction. This supposed individualist is one of the most deeply social artists of the modern age, and this volume, by focusing on the images more than the content of the writing, helps make that visible. The book is appropriate for a "post-literate" age, and it will make some readers nostalgic for a time before we took our notes on computers. A glance at Kierkegaard's 1834 notes on Schleiermacher (52), and we can watch him falling asleep. A moving image of Kierkegaard falling asleep over Schleiermacher in 1834 is priceless, and that kind of textual evidence is not so easy to discern in electronic traces on a computer hard drive. But perhaps that is the next task for diligent archivists, and perhaps this little volume will spur them on.

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