

THE BEST TO BE HAD IS THE EXPECTATION OF PLEASURE:
THE OUTLOOK OF AN-OTHER HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, OR,
OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD'S OTHER?

Poul Houe
University of Minnesota

Abstract

The relationship between Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen was quite distant and asymmetrical, yet terse and consequential. Enforced by Kierkegaard's polemics, and by the parodies with which Andersen responded, it posited Andersen as Kierkegaard's other, both intertextually and interpersonally. But as narrow as Kierkegaard's take on Andersen—a man allegedly without a life-view—was, and as few texts it involved by each author, it is suited to set in motion a more comprehensive reading of Andersen's oeuvre, main genres and thematics, and an appreciation of an otherness far more complex, productive, and prescient than Kierkegaard envisioned. Much of the tension between the two authors issues from their different responses to the fractured underground of Denmark's Golden Age culture; and viewed as memes, Andersen's texts involved in this intertextual relation epitomize a perceptive ambiguity that travels far beyond his nation's borders and enlighten deep cultural schisms to this day.

Key words: Intertextuality, otherness, selfhood, travel fiction, meme.

Resumen

La relación entre Kierkegaard y Hans Christian Andersen fue lejana y asimétrica, aunque también sucinta y relevante. Reforzada por la polémica entablada por Kierkegaard y por las parodias con las que Andersen respondió, esta relación sugiere que Andersen puede ser entendido como el *otro* de Kierkegaard, tanto en un sentido intertextual como interpersonal. A pesar de las limitaciones del enfrentamiento de Kierkegaard con Andersen —un hombre que presuntamente carecía de una visión de vida— y de los pocos textos en los que ambos autores están involucrados, dicha relación funciona como base para realizar una interpretación más completa de la obra de Andersen —con sus temas y sus géneros principales—, así como para llevar a cabo una valoración mucho más compleja, productiva y clarividente sobre la otredad que la

que Kierkegaard tenía en mente. Una buena parte de la tensión entre los dos escritores surge a partir de sus distintas reacciones frente a la fragmentación de sub-culturas en la Edad de Oro de Dinamarca. Interpretados como memes, los textos de Andersen analizados en este comentario intertextual representan una perceptiva ambigüedad que traspasa las fronteras de su país nativo y arroja luz sobre las profundas divisiones culturales que sobreviven incluso en nuestra época.

Palabras clave: Intertextualidad, otredad, identidad, ficción de viaje, meme.

I. Introduction

Published in 2006, a selection of my articles and talks between 1969 and 2005 about Hans Christian Andersen bore the title *En anden Andersen—og andres*, ‘An-other Andersen—and the Andersen of others.’ As stated on its cover, the volume shows “how the poet and his art have been perceived and featured in other places and at other times” than his own cultural environment. “Geographically and mentally, personally and artistically,” he appears “in strong and constant motion,” as “a character whose deepest insights” come at “great existential costs.” Meanwhile, “the others” in question “often detect themselves and their otherness in a relation to Andersen,” while “their Andersen is often different from ours and Andersen’s own.”

The following essay supplements the contents of the 2006 anthology. The goal remains to show an-other Andersen, but this time by elaborating and critiquing his identity as implied by Søren Kierkegaard in his take on Andersen the poet as a distinctive other. That said, this other Andersen stands apart from the preceding others in important respects. Though Kierkegaard was indeed of another breed than Andersen, the two of them were situated in the same place and time.¹ On the other hand, while strongly positing Andersen as an-other, Kierkegaard certainly doesn’t understand himself (and his own otherness) in contrast to Andersen alone. As much as his Andersen differs from Andersen’s notion of himself, and from our present-day notion of him, there is more to Andersen’s otherness than

¹ The critic Torben Brostrøm writes in an article about Copenhagen critics battling and role playing that “there were strong tensions behind the city ramparts, where people gladly reviewed and fought each other.” Torben Brostrøm, “Kritikerfejder og rollespil,” *Information*, March 4, 2011.

Kierkegaard's "othering" of him accounts for.

Thus my reading of Andersen in light of Kierkegaard's critique of him—and of his response to that critique—will draw on the relation between our two Danish Golden Age giants as they saw it themselves, chiefly by using Kierkegaard's (mis)reading of Andersen as a roadmap for investigating the opaqueness and ambiguity in his oeuvre. The astute Kierkegaard's telling blindness to Andersen's complexity can be used as a shortcut to an insight into Andersen's weaknesses and strengths alike; elements of Kierkegaard's deconstruction of Andersen are useful building blocks for an appreciation of Andersen's authority and authenticity in their contradictory fullness.²

Using as primary texts Andersen's third novel, Kierkegaard's lengthy critique of this work, and Andersen's more cursory response—in an important fairy tale and a comedic play (as well as in some letters, diary entries and autobiographical snippets)—and as secondary texts several that deal more or less directly with the primary ones, I offer a few memes and themes as venues for considering Andersen's multifaceted authorial persona. Also, I enlist Paul Binding's recent *Hans Christian Andersen: European Witness* to help contextualize this figure, which Kierkegaard approached so reductively in his literary critique.³ Kierkegaard's onslaught on its characteristics notwithstanding, Andersen's artistic self continues to invite and resist critical attention. Hence the following attempt to make the former's work facilitate arrival at the latter's.

II. *In Place of an Outlook: A Point of Departure*

When Kierkegaard (1813-55) decisively clashed with Andersen (1805-75), it was as reviewer of Andersen's third novel, *Only a Fiddler* (1837). While the review, titled *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838), was the first volume to be published by Kierkegaard, then a twenty five year old university student of theology, the eight years elder Andersen was rapidly approaching European fame. By the time he was twenty-five he had already published *A Walking Tour from Holmen Canal to the Eastern Point of Amager* (1829), a humorous fantasy leading from one Copenhagen location to another and the first of many travelogues he would write, as well as a

² In making these statements I'm obviously leaning on the terminology of classical works of criticism by Harold Bloom and Paul de Man, respectively.

³ Paul Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen. European Witness*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2014.

collection of *Poems* (1830). 1831 saw publication of his second travelogue, *Shadow Pictures*, and in 1835 appeared his first novel, *The Improvisatore*, as well as the first two booklets of his *Fairy Tales Told for Children*, for which he would receive worldwide recognition in addition to the European renown for his novels. The second novel, called *O. T.*, came out in 1836, one year before the appearance of the third volume in the genre of fairy tales for children and the 1837 novel that Kierkegaard lambasted.

If you add to these data the observation that, beginning with *Shadow Pictures*, Andersen's travelogues feature more journeys abroad than at home—and that his debut novel is set in Italy before its successor returns us to Danish settings and his third combines Danish and European scenarios—it becomes clear that Andersen at the time of Kierkegaard's onslaught was not merely a prolific writer, but one who had wet his feet in a remarkable variety of genres and physical and mental geographies. That even his creative and stylistic versatility was eye-catching explains, at least in part, what triggered Kierkegaard's critical downpour on his artistic persona.

As Paul Binding puts it, after quoting relevant textual excerpts, neither Andersen's second nor third novel is, "in its author's mind, a true *Künstler/Bildungsroman*, which is clearly how Kierkegaard read *Only a Fiddler*."⁴ To briefly remind the reader of this genre's template, its hero begins his (it is usually a male) development as a homebound child and youngster, who later leaves home for a location abroad to independently challenge his inherited and acculturated traits with alternative and consciousness-raising perceptions and experiences. Eventually the maturation he obtains away gets affirmed, even raised, as he returns home to consciously and authentically reclaim the familiar from his upbringing. This final move marks a win-win situation in which tradition is confirmed by its re-appropriation, and the new is validated by its capacity to give rebirth to what was formerly received and known only spontaneously. In some conformity with the pattern of Hegelian dialectics, this novel genre features human self-realization as body and mind develop beyond the scope of any single individual, by dint of an exemplary individual's dual capacity for experiencing and reflecting on himself as an integral part of the world around him.

In the postscript to his scholarly edition of Andersen's text, Mogens Brøndsted tersely summarizes Kierkegaard's critical reading of it to mean "that the characters in Andersen's novel show no development, and that he himself lacks a firm personality and life-view; he is stuck in 'lyric self-

⁴ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 155.

perdition' without maturing to the real epic stage, which supposedly involves 'a deep and earnest embrace of a given reality.'⁵ Yet while concluding that the artist and his critic eventually reconciled, Brøndsted urges readers of the *Fiddler* to escape the principal views of both: Andersen's sentimentalism and Kierkegaard's sarcasm. Instead, Andersen "must be viewed with posterity's own eyes, as the shaping of an inner experience in need of understanding but of critical judgment as well."⁶

The subsequent discussion will draw upon both Andersen and Kierkegaard's insights in an effort to make a fuller appreciation of Andersen's oeuvre than either one affords. Kierkegaard's contrary view of his opponent will help clarify what Andersen saw—including: saw of himself—but only if the insight arrived at this way is critically reflected back on its source. As stated at the outset, the most valuable outcome of such an insight is embedded in its inherent blindness, to which also Villy Sørensen testifies in his description of how "Kierkegaard and Andersen had made the excellent division of labor that one prophesied about the horror of the future, the other about its wonders—and both were proven right."⁷

So while Kierkegaard believes himself to have nailed Andersen as a failing artist, what he *has* in fact nailed is rather Andersen's otherness. And while he has partially done that well, there is more to Andersen's otherness than meets Kierkegaard's eye. For instance, that it works in ways Kierkegaard has little idea of, whereas Andersen has at least some idea of it. To grasp this scheme in its entirety, it is important both to note where and why Kierkegaard fails to see it, and where and why Andersen does see it, if only to a degree. Instead of a mere failure, the otherness in question—though not the novel that exposes it—nears a tragedy, or a failure that exceeds the personal and is by no means a failure only. Had Andersen not "failed" as a *Bildungskünstler*, he would not have succeeded as a "tragic other," which to some small degree he does.

Intimations of this doubleness, and of tacit implications in its wake, abound in Kierkegaard's exposure of Andersen. Being inundated in lyricism, an authorial figure like Andersen's, to Kierkegaard's mind, can only make

⁵ Mogens Brøndsted, "Efterskrift," in H.C. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand. Original Roman i tre Dele*, Tekstudgivelse, Efterskrift og Noter af Mogens Brøndsted, 1988, 2. rev. ed., Copenhagen: Danske Klassikere/Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab/Borgen 2004, p. 291.

⁶ Brøndsted, "Efterskrift," p. 292.

⁷ Villy Sørensen, "Om H.C. Andersens romaner," in his *Hverken—eller. Kritiske betragtninger*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1961, p. 155 f.

the transition to the epic (required for the writing of a *Bildungsroman* or another type of novel grounded in its author's inner self-reliance) in one of three ways: by silently devoting a phase of his own life to serious study, which was not in the cards, given Andersen's personality; by viewing his contemporary world coalesce in poetic-pictorial fashion around a single hero; or by having a motley set of significant forces within his hero's world unite in unswerving pursuit of a single goal—this with an all-absorbing energy that could conceivably offer the author the life-supplement he needed most.

However, neither one of these quite extroverted types of fulfillment would be Andersen's; he lived, according to Kierkegaard, in a political era whose mass-indulging rhetoric would not please him. Facing daily "the most ridiculous combinations of individuals shaken together like bits of glass in a kaleidoscope" and sensing the "aesthetic abstract impotence" of this development, what can a lyric poet do? While a stronger personality than Andersen's—Heine's, say—might respond with fiery and world-defying poetic eruptions, his self-centered weakness and "original elegiac mood" only gets modified by the cultural dearth to "a certain gloom and bitterness against the world." Accordingly, the end product is modest: "poetic powers" that are "productive in their self-consuming activity" and "manifest themselves as a low flame that flares up again and again."⁸

By this account, both reflection and powerful inwardness are qualities in short supply in Andersen's personality, a shortage that results in the "temptation to produce instead of developing himself, to hide an inner emptiness under motley pictures, to let himself be absorbed in generation [production] without any reproduction."⁹ As a novelist whose "admittedly poetic wishes, longings, etc." have been repressed for a long time in his "own interior by the prosaic world," Andersen leans towards "that little world, accessible only to the poetic temperament, where the true poet amid life's adversities celebrates his Sabbath."¹⁰ It is, however, a move that much resembles the strategy for keeping one's feet warm by peeing in the shoes. In Kierkegaard's own words, Andersen's private adversities are scarcely shipped:

to that world and incorporated there in new individuals before the nisse already loudly proclaims his arrival there, in other words, before

⁸ *EPW*, p. 72-3.

⁹ *EPW*, p. 74.

¹⁰ *EPW*, p. 74-5.

the whole mob of depressing reflections about life ... grow up, with a luxuriance like the thistles in the Gospel, while Andersen sleeps. In vain Andersen works against them; yet sometimes he gives up these efforts, sometimes he turns to the opposite side, and, ruffled and discontented with the actual world, in the faintheartedness of his own poetic creations he seeks a compensation, as it were, for his own faintheartedness. Therefore ... he sits and cries over his unfortunate heroes who must go under, and why?—because Andersen is the man he is. The same joyless battle Andersen himself fights in life now repeats itself in his poetry. But precisely because Andersen cannot separate the poetic from himself, because, so to speak, he cannot get rid of it, but as soon as a poetic mood has acquired freedom to act, this is immediately overwhelmed, with or without his will, by the prosaic—precisely therefore is it impossible to obtain a total impression from Andersen's short novels.¹¹

The last words are key. Our critic rightly deems the takeaway from Andersen's novels devoid of "total impression." But is such an absence of totality necessarily an artistic vice? And why can the steps leading up to this conclusion not signify an outright artistic virtue? Kierkegaard rightly notes about him personally that he "volatilizes into fiction, so that sometimes one is actually tempted to believe that Andersen is a character who has run away from an as yet unfinished group composed by a poet. And certainly it is undeniable that Andersen could become a very poetic person in a poem, in which case all his poetry would be understood in its fragmentary truth."¹² As Paul Binding also shows, with quotes from *Only a Fiddler*, far from fleeing a whole shaping up, Andersen strategizes the arrival of a "fragmentary truth" in his fiction. His quoted pronouncements—and others he makes—to this effect will be addressed when I turn to discussing his novel closer up. But for now, let me finish this shortcut to Kierkegaard's final diagnosis of Andersen's shortcomings as a novelist, since his critical articulation of Andersen's artistic prescience, if only read against the grain, is a suitable preamble to my discussion.

As mentioned earlier, the catchword for the *Bildungsroman* and its author—under whose (or similar) auspices Kierkegaard believes both entities must operate if a true novelistic art is to ensue—is *life-view*, which Andersen does not have:

a life-view is more than a quintessence or a sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality; it is more than experience, which as such is

¹¹ EPW, p. 75

¹² EPW, pp. 75-6.

always fragmentary. It is, namely, the transubstantiation of experience; it is an unshakable certainty in oneself won from all experience, whether this has oriented itself only in all worldly relationships... by which means it keeps itself from contact with a deeper experience—or whether in its heavenward direction (the religious) it has found therein the center as much for its heavenly as its earthly existence...¹³

Clearly, Andersen does not subscribe, at least not whole-heartedly, to “the transubstantiation of experience.” So, continues Kierkegaard, if only for the sake of argument, “is it, then, absolutely necessary for a novelist to have such a life-view, or is there not a certain poetic mood that as such, in union with an animated portrayal, can achieve the same?”¹⁴

After a series of lengthy digressions on the questioner’s part, he finally returns to his theme:

to explain, through a brief suggestion of the necessity of a life-view for the novel and short-novel writer, how things stand with Andersen in this respect. A life-view is really providence in the novel; it is its deeper unity, which makes the novel have the center of gravity in itself. A life-view frees it from being arbitrary and purposeless, since the purpose is present everywhere in the work of art. But when such a life-view is lacking, the novel either seeks to insinuate some theory... at the expense of poetry or it makes a finite and incidental contact with the author’s flesh and blood.¹⁵

Interestingly, Andersen was by no means alien to faith in “providence,” yet Kierkegaard’s point that this faith has not translated into his work of art is well-taken. As in so many other respects, Andersen’s vision lacks the totality it toys with, as later modern visions tend to do. His conflicted self is his only link to this artistic endeavor, and that connection is expressly deemed “incidental,” which by Kierkegaard’s standard spells artistic anathema. More broadly, it is evident that the modern world is on the horizon—and rising—around both writers. But while Andersen is, at least intuitively, inclined toward the new, Kierkegaard reflectively seeks to fend it off. This is how both of them, each in his way, are impacted by it.

Having said as much about Andersen’s lukewarm allegiance to life-view and *Bildung* idioms, the beating around the bush cannot continue, and there’s no avoiding the final blow to our novelist from his unwavering

¹³ EPW, p. 76.

¹⁴ EPW, p. 79.

¹⁵ KW, I, p. 81.

younger critic:

One will best convince oneself of how markedly Andersen's novels stand in a wrong relation to his person by reproducing the total impression his novels leave behind them. We by no means think that it is wrong that an individual succumbs in the novel, but then it must be a poetic truth, not... as in Andersen, his final will. We by no means require... good sense and clarity about life in every single one of his poetically created individuals. On the contrary, if the worst comes to worst, we shall grant him full authority to let them go out of their minds, only it must not happen in such a way that a madness in the third person is replaced by one in the first, that the author himself takes the mad person's role. In a novel there must be an immortal spirit that survives the whole. In Andersen, however, there is absolutely no grip on things: when the hero dies, Andersen dies, too, and at most forces from the reader a sigh over them both as the final impression.¹⁶

The verdict is doubly remarkable in that it straddles epochal borders in two ways. It takes Andersen to task for not respecting the autonomy of the work of art, yet it confuses this almost New Critical doctrine by insisting on "an immortal spirit that survives the whole." But if our critic himself is torn between tradition and modernity, so obviously is his object—or subject, as it were. For Andersen's problem, by Kierkegaard's account, is his subjectivity. Not his subjectivity as such, but the kind of subjectivity he exudes. His right to take his characters to where he sees fit, even if the move takes them out of the ordinary, even the recognizable, is not at issue. Only when he safeguards such deviation from conventional norms by investing his own person in the process, when he literally takes his fictive characters *to heart*, does he cross a red line. As we shall later see, the charge is not unjustified. Andersen no doubt blends personal fact and artistic fiction in hard-to-control ways. But even worse, "in Andersen, there is absolutely no grip on things."¹⁷

¹⁶ EPW, pp. 82-3.

¹⁷ Johan de Mylius, among others, remarks that Kierkegaard's critique in *From the Papers of One Still Living* of Andersen's subjectivity was standard fare at the time; only later, after departing from Hegel's philosophy, does Kierkegaard himself declare subjectivity for the truth. (Johan de Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris. H.C. Andersen og hans eventyr*, Copenhagen: Høst & Søn 2005, p. 215). Julia Watkin, in her "Historical Introduction" to *From the Papers of One Still Living*, in *Early Polemical Writings by Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. with introduction and notes by Julia Watkin, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1990 (Kierkegaard's Writings, I [KW, I]), instead stresses the change taking place between the book's covers; to her, Kierkegaard definitely altered his view, but the impact for Andersen's novel was that his critic's initially positive assessment

What Kierkegaard will be seen to have missed is Andersen's (partial) awareness of this chaos in his universe; in a letter written just a few years before *Only a Fiddler*, he revealingly confesses: "I seize upon the world's disharmonies ... I almost believe that I myself am a disharmony in this world,"¹⁸ and both the disorder and such glimpses of insight in it are what makes him modern beyond Kierkegaard's imagination, even postmodern in terms of his unabashed conflation of his private and authorial subject. As for the latter conundrum, his proven biographical meddling in his characters' world: it may belong to the chaos but also be an effort (in vain) to limit it. Scholars like Bo Hakon Jørgensen have reiterated Kierkegaard's point that the former is the case. Andersen neglects his own identity and its borders, so "the things he is concerned about can usurp so much power that they completely separate him from his normal I. This often causes him to interfere with the narrative development and criticize the characters involved in order to handle their rampant environment."¹⁹

To be sure, what Kierkegaard finds unforgivable is not simply his subject's artistic transgressions or toying with artistic norms, but the absence of an "immortal spirit" in his work. Ironically, however, if there ever were a pre-modern entity, which the modern Andersen gladly, if not dogmatically, abided by, it was this spirit. So again, Kierkegaard's criticism is but partially right. Immortal spirit in itself is not the bone of contention between him and Andersen; but the critical status of this spirit in an increasingly secular world is, and it both separates the two of them from each other and divides each one of them internally.

To Andersen the authority of this spirit is not an issue; he finds it both comforting and uplifting. To Kierkegaard, however, it is infinitely important: as a first line of defense, the guarantor of the whole; as a second

turned unfavorable in the course of his review because "his basic attitude to life" had been replaced by "an ethical-religious life-view." (*EPW*, p. xxvii.) That said, the labored writing style could conceivably be an instance of deliberate self-parody, typical of a recent young covert. At least, according to Watkin, there may be this to consider: "for Kierkegaard, as for generations of students, there is a factor of reaction to mental fatigue in studying a subject. Many students have parodied a style or philosophy, not because they were for or against it but out of a healthy, humorous reaction to the effort of serious concentration on serious subjects." (*EPW*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.) In characterizing Andersen as Kierkegaard's Other, it is thus crucial to clarify which Kierkegaard's Other he might be.

¹⁸ Cited (in my translation) from *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, 1878; 2nd ed. Copenhagen: Aschehoug 2005, p. 173.

¹⁹ Bo Hakon Jørgensen, "At tænke i eventyr," in Jørgen Breitenstein et al., *H.C. Andersen og hans kunst i nyt lys*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 1976, p. 57.

line, the survivor of the whole (in case the first defense line is overrun). This is where Andersen's third novel becomes a case in point. Its malfunction, as it were, as a bridge over troubled water, evokes Kierkegaard's idiosyncrasy. Especially since the currents underneath it likely issue from epochal changes (to which each writer is party in his own way), Kierkegaard counts on the bridge for a superior outlook, whereas Andersen is prone to engage the turbulent waters by observing them from different perspectives.²⁰ To him the view from atop is but one perspective on human affairs, privileged merely as a point of departure from which to engage other viewpoints. To cite Bo Hakon Jørgensen once again, this relativism was fatal for Andersen's larger compositions of novels and dramas, "but in the fairy tale [he] found precisely the genre that fit his form of consciousness, for the fairy tale is without life-view."²¹

III. *Only We Know! But Do We Also Know How Little We Know?*

I've used the "bridge over troubled water" metaphor advisedly. The trouble in and with *Only a Fiddler* is actually twofold. One part is the novel's failure as a *Bildungsroman*, and this shows in its protagonist, Christian, who lives his entire life without coming to realize and express his artistic self. His trouble is then aggravated by a second one, namely, that there is a competing female protagonist (and counterpart to Christian), whose name is Naomi and whose life story only adds harm to both the novel and Christian's injury.

The last time she meets him—her suitor-in-vain since childhood—is on the novel's last page. His drab life has ended and his remains are on their way to the graveyard, but she has no idea who is in the casket. Accompanied by her uppity French husband on a rare joint visit from abroad and now on the road to pay a call on her equally distinguished foster father—and Christian's encourager-in-chief—Naomi appears to be the success Christian never became. But the lush appearance is a failure in disguise. Though alive and seemingly well, Naomi has not fulfilled but lost her self. Her development may have resulted in glamor but has truly come to naught and left her spirit as dead as her suitor in the coffin, if not deader. Whether sarcastic, bitter

²⁰ Julia Watkin takes this snapshot of Kierkegaard's view of the individual (as opposed to Andersen's position): "If a person consistently refuses to let his life be dissipated in the multiplicity of experiences and refers each experience back to himself, to his view of existence, the life can be 'understood backward,' experience be interpreted in the light of the 'idea' of 'life-view,'" *EPW*, p. xxviii.

²¹ Bo Hakon Jørgensen, "At tænke i eventyr," p. 55.

or tragic is the right term to capture this “harmony,” it seems to mark the end of a *shadowy Bildungsroman*. At least some have argued, in tune with Kierkegaard, for such a put-down characterization of the *Fiddler*.

But where’s the beef, the evidence of Andersen’s capacity or lack thereof as a novelist? And what does the evidence tell us? Critics I cited earlier have argued that Andersen is best when he thinks in fairy tales, i.e., when his thinking is elementary, material—and childlike—in noting “without regrets ... that the world is not one” and that it “doesn’t look the same when seen from two places.”²² Rather than telling about this or that person’s reality, as happens when his novels through their “artistic composition speak in terms of life-view,” Andersen’s tales tell about the deeper reality “that the world is not one” but consists in principle of horizontally separated mini-worlds, each existing in its own right. Humanistic interdependence between such semi-autonomous units is as present in his tales as a life-view is absent in his novels.²³

The psychological underpinnings of these textual characteristics are many and complex. Pertaining most directly to Andersen’s way of artistically grappling with the presence or absence of life-view and immortal spirit are discussions such as Mogens Brøndsted’s of Andersen’s personality problem, which concludes that the poet could feel it “as though his laboriously integrated individuality threatened to fall apart into disjunctive parts unless he maintained his conviction about a spiritual and even immortal core,” which amounts to “the ideal of a harmoniously integrated personality, which cannot truly be reached in this life.”²⁴

A more comprehensive psychological portrayal, written by Klaus P. Mortensen, stresses, among other things, the young Andersen’s airy and restless spirit, and the crippling effect of *Bildung* until it hardens to a bark underneath which Andersen’s self can securely unfold until he settles for a compromise; so, *Bildung*, yes, but spiritual rather than vocational.²⁵ In the final analysis, Mortensen argues, Andersen finds true *Bildung* to be God-

²² Jørgensen, “At tænke i eventyr,” pp. 58-9.

²³ See Jørgensen, “At tænke i eventyr,” pp. 66-68.

²⁴ Mogens Brøndsted, “H.C. Andersens personlighedsproblem,” in Jørgen Breitenstein et al., *H.C. Andersen og hans kunst i nyt lys*, pp. 29-30.

²⁵ Klaus P. Mortensen, *Svanen og Skyggen—historien om unge Andersen*, Copenhagen: Gad 1989. Except for direct quotes, which will be referenced in separate notes, my summary presentation of Mortensen’s work in this and the following three paragraphs refers most specifically to the following pages: 41, 42, 47, 57, 60, 64 f., 67, 88, 92, 115, 117, 119, 122, 123, 126, 133, 143, 148, 159, 161, 162, 176, 184, 186, 187, 189, 191, 198.

given and inherited and revises his compromise so that *Bildung* becomes not his identity but a facade behind which his true identity is safe. As he later commits himself to his art, he cautiously safeguards this self by depicting outside matters in which the self cannot get lost; it is the measure by which his poetry will be propelled by sexual anxieties, which in turn will be enhanced by reflection in his linguistic imagination to the point of becoming autoerotic. Generally speaking, Andersen presages modernism by living his life in his art.

As he begins to travel the world, he finds his self further strengthened by encounters with foreigners, and these outer journeys translate into inner ones that stimulate his imagination. Added to his poetics already in place, this amounts to an imagination that doesn't escape reality but penetrates it. In his fairy tales the adult author reclaims his lost innocence for a new order, challenging the ruling adult one, but so innocently that the powers that be hardly notice it. This is what Bo Hakon Jørgensen calls "thinking in fairy tales." As a result, the world we thought we knew begins to yield to the world thought of as new!

The dire side of Andersen's development does not subside, though, according to Mortensen. Social traumas turn inward and suffering becomes a calling to show readers, as in a mirror, the truth they reject. Altogether, poetry is where Andersen locates his possibilities as well as the cost they incur. Life as a poem and life in reality are two lives, and Andersen's love is clearly the former. But part of the cost is the growing paradox of searching for innocence with such striking awareness. As the self is split by the paradoxical, it eventually turns into a double. Of Andersen's classical tale on the subject, "The Shadow," Mortensen writes: "It is from the insight that humanness is merely human-likeness that the Shadow derives its uncanny power."²⁶ More generally, the demonic does not originate from the arts, but from the human world of hypocrisy and moral ambiguity. Self-control may be called for, but again: the cost is high in terms of a diminished devotion to life, or a coldness that only ends when in heaven.

At the end of his own life Andersen's art and artistic longings depart increasingly from their creator; art doesn't lead to redemption, for it is redemption. In conclusion, Mortensen accounts for the existential costs of Andersen's tale of life by saying that art comes at the price of a wasted life. At this point nihilism is the single force left intact. The world wishes to be fooled, and Andersen's existential pain keeps growing until it gives birth to

²⁶ Mortensen, *Svanen og Skyggen—historien om unge Andersen*, p. 171.

nearly his last tale, “Auntie Toothache,” of which Mortensen says: “Its salt, its redeeming humor and sovereign irony are based not on a surplus, but on a thundering deficit.”²⁷

That little connects Andersen’s novels to accounts of his psychology like these suggests, once again, that it was not the novel form that did his personality traits most justice, nor was that genre the one best served by these. But if his long narratives were less in sync with his personal and artistic evolution than his shorter tales and poems, there is all the more reason to patrol their borders for insights into why the genre—along with that other lengthy genre: the drama—remained for so long Andersen’s capital investment, artistically speaking. Why did he stick to a medium that not only Kierkegaard found him ill-suited for and that barely met with his own expectations? Was he an artistic masochist, or were there unaccounted for benefits to be had from this less-than-perfect match? It is time, on the background of Kierkegaard’s polemics against Andersen as a novelist and person, and with recent scholarly readings of his personality and artistry in mind as well, to address these puzzling questions in relation to *Only a Fiddler*.

While officially subscribing to the immortal spirit in both life and art—and certainly not denouncing it—the epic narrator Andersen avails himself of in his text is a “we” anxiously supervising the fictional characters’ actions and motives. Short epigraphs preceding each chapter leave the reader in no doubt about the author’s constant presence, says Mogens Brøndsted, “as well as the many inserted reflections. Here’s made no effort to pretend the story tells itself.”²⁸ The reader is left with the impression that the author trusts neither the spirit he officially evokes nor the capacity of his Olympic, panoramic epic narrator to be a spiritual agent and provider of the sustenance needed for the characters to fully manifest their human potential. Ambiguity haunts this narrative, but not simply as a drawback.

I referenced earlier the critic Paul Binding’s comments on Andersen’s distance from the *Bildungsroman*. They were based solely on one of twenty-five or so passages in the novel where the narrative “we” protrudes—here at the scene where Christian watches his mother die—to say: “We will not look at this sorrow and distress, but hasten away from it, far away, forwards in Time. One bold jump will we make in Naomi’s and Christian’s history, not to pass over individual points, but to assemble these and contemplate

²⁷ Mortensen, *Svanen og Skyggen—historien om unge Andersen*, p. 197.

²⁸ Brøndsted, “Efterskrift,” p. 282

them from a better standpoint.”²⁹ While Binding is right in reading these lines in contrast to the discourse of a *Bildungsroman*, his analysis is too simplistic and overlooks that the words are those of a wannabe novel that fundamentally fails in its endeavor.

Had a truly immortal spirit reigned, there would not be room, let alone a need, for a unifying *pluralis majestatis* narrator to intervene as an editor, nervously (“hasten away”) seeking to rule out certain sentiments (“sorrow and distress”) in favor of a future (“forwards in Time”) more palatable to this narrator’s taste (“a better standpoint”)—and presumably the taste of readers already implicitly enrolled among “we” or “us.” Rather than serving the development and continuity of the protagonists’ life histories, a “bold jump,” or selection, is thus made to have unruly premises match a foregone conclusion. All the same, the author/narrator is not unaware that such moves may transgress the (immortal) spirit of a true *Bildungsroman*, which is why that genre’s template is urgently invoked. On closer inspection, the assurances just enumerated that we are not witnessing a reckless flirtation with anarchy go even further. They actually suggest that the narrator’s selective intervention in the characters’ histories and life experiences conforms to the way an immortal spirit would self-justify. Were it not for the labored effort to “assemble” and move this sequence of “individual points” towards a “better standpoint ... and contemplate them ... forwards in Time,” it would be the perfect code for development toward a spiritual harmony in all eternity. But it is all forced narrative labor.

And so are, with characteristic variations, most other explicit “we” manifestations in *Only a Fiddler*, which, by the way, occur with increasing frequency as the novel progresses.³⁰ It begins with little Christian entering little Naomi’s garden as a land of dreams. “We” are there to tell the reader how a grown-up would see it, but also to assure ourselves that “we” see it differently, as only a child could. Or are “we” not sure that Christian, the actual child, can see what a child ought to see? Is that why “we” are there safe-guarding an ideally innocent view? Later “we” show up to witness Christian’s encounter with his godfather, an artistically inclined and mysterious Norwegian outlaw, who might even be Christian’s actual father:

²⁹ Paul Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 155; Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 247.

³⁰ The following discussion of the majority of relevant passages refers to Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 18, 30, 77, 91, 119, 123, 169, 184, 194, 196, 197, 207, 226, 229, 231, 233, 243, 247, and 258, respectively.

an attractive repellent, if you will, whose borderline existence alone calls for narrative supervision, be it for the comfort of the innocent child or the reader.

Even deeper motivation for the pronouncements by “we” are found in a passage about Christian’s utter loneliness. To elicit the reader’s empathy at this point requires an authoritative insight, and one that only “we” can alert the reader to appreciate. What triggers the insight is “the sprout that shot forward in Christian’s soul [and whose] bitter waft makes older, matures the thought, while it carves its runes of wisdom into our heart.” As in our first example of the novel’s “we” operation, the present passage has a fictive protagonist at a total loss and an author who cannot stand the thought thereof and therefore calls upon the omniscient *pluralis majestatis* narrator to save the day and pave the way in the reader’s mind for prompting the otherwise stranded character. The means to that end includes an appealing plant metaphor of growth, and once again the reader’s contemplation and reflection are the strings being pulled to maintain the illusion of a continued spiritual development that has actually come to a halt.

More parenthetically, the same “we” later appears to remind us of life’s complexity, where only one side of it is obvious: “It was the low comical reality of everyday life that was prevalent here; we could also ... have captured a beautiful poetic side, everyone has it, if only momentarily; it still exists.” As previously noted, life’s total harmony, with spirit as its point of gravity, remains Andersen’s ideal. But not only does it take narrative midwifery to bring it forth, it takes argumentation, persuasion, reiteration, and other tools of less than immortal spiritual design. As in this case, most interventions by “we” are initiated by an occurrence that is harmful because it is one-sided. A slimy toad invites rejection, but if suffering, even it deserves empathy and compassion, and so does, say, a whore. However, in the world of *Only a Fiddler* such an embracing and holistic insight is in short supply among the characters, so the narrative “we” invites the reader to make up for the shortcoming—at the cost of reminding the same reader of the actual absence of spiritual coherence he or she is being solicited to restore.

On other occasions, the narrative “we” commits to such integrity by debunking a fake version of it. A governess finds the presence of a priest with an apostle’s face “poetry in the prose of life,” but “we could not share her opinion.” It may sound paradoxical to label a rejection of poetry in prose a holistic step, but it’s clearly an unjustifiable conclusion that is being aborted here, which is indirectly and ultimately in the interest of genuine spirituality. When Andersen’s “we” acts as a referee, one is usually left

with the impression of an even-handed arbiter. For instance, in an almost autonomous narrative reflection on the nature of art, contemporary art experts are credited with the view that the best of antiquity's sculpture were also painted. "Whether or not they are right, we don't know; it is also only the given idea, we will address." "Our" purpose is to appreciate art at its best, which in turn is needed to introduce Ladislaus into the narrative, a larger-than-life and mysteriously sensuous Romani horseman, who completely possesses protagonist Naomi's imagination and desires.

Shortly thereafter, when this rowdy woman suddenly takes off to go, God knows where, "we" are smitten by her free spirit and decide to follow its lead, in fact determined not to return until "we have experienced an adventure that reasonably rewards our journey; in the event we encounter nothing, we'll stay out there and never return home." "Our" benefit from this piggybacking on the unpredictable is twofold: a free ride into the unknown, yet the opportunity to record its mysterious ways. Thus having it both ways—risky, yet safe and secure—also applies next, when "we" onboard the steamship sail into homoerotic images of a union between Ladislaus and a Danish teenager: "Yes, if the waves could tell so that we understood them, there might be many spicy stories to be had." But as the ocean and its fish, even the worms in the ground, are tightlipped about such piquant matters, "we too would be silent with respect to an interpretation of these words." "We" are at once guarding the narrative's facade of propriety and serving as its emissary into duplicitous human subterrain; and "we" perform the same double function when Naomi later faces van Dyk's Samson and Dalila painting. "Was it merely the painter's art that captivated Naomi, or did the subject in itself create associations of ideas that deeply impacted her, the answer to that we dare not betray." Instead of narrating, "we" signal what must not be narrated.

A narrative entity that admittedly censors its own insights from becoming available to readers has different purposes in Andersen's text. In the examples above, flirtation with an illicit unknown by some characters, perhaps by the text as a whole, may be intended to reach for a cutting edge; at the same time, the text has no interest in going over the edge, for which reason its epic narrator stands sentinel at the abyss. But in some situations "we" act as referee for other reasons. In an exchange with Naomi's noble stepfather, a doctor wonders why only stepmothers and not stepfathers are considered evil. Perhaps the latter's shortcoming is weakness, responds this stepfather—to which "we" make the comment that "whether we should

blame him accordingly, will depend on our own life-view.”

Interestingly, the epic narrator here invokes a criterion—life-view—that is otherwise missing from the narrative. Are “we” then delusional? Or are “we” rather saying that it is the narrative in its entirety that is without life-view, whereas individual characters may well have one? If the latter holds true, it would only confirm that Andersen’s novel is indeed about a fragmented world whose parts may relate to one another without forming an integrated whole that’s larger and richer than the sum of its parts. Whatever the answer, the fact that “we” feel enticed to serve the narrative dialogue with moral guidelines must imply that such orientation is not otherwise accessible, which it undoubtedly would be, had the text been permeated by an immortal spirit.

This absent authority is perhaps most strongly felt when it comes to protagonist Christian’s effort to reach for precisely a spiritual note on his violin and in his life. He sorely fails in both respects, and as Kierkegaard intimated, Andersen was personally too invested in his character to let this failure rest with him alone. Instead, his novel’s “we” unashamedly fills in Christian’s blanks, acts on his behalf with passionate verbosity, and ends a with plea in italics and an (self)assuring outburst. Like Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s “Lieder ohne Worte,” compositions into which a sensitive audience would spiritually know how to insert the missing text, “Christian’s violin play, too, is such that we could attribute words to it; if only these would be heard in the halls of the mighty, if only in each century at least one true talent might be saved from want and lack: you almighty! ... *Let not the true talent earthly perish!* The words were heard—yes indeed, as was Christian’s violin play.”

This thinly veiled interference by the biographical author with his fictional narrative even extends into an essayistic critique—of critics, whose forte is merely to wield more power than their targets. Criticism (as Andersen himself had experienced it) must be seen as nothing but the critic’s subjective opinion, and ultimately, “in the other world,” every earthly creature’s endeavors will be subject to a judgment that will dwarf such mundane pomposity. In the case of Christian, Andersen’s fiddler, critical reception of his music is quite positive, but even so, a mixed blessing. For as the novel courageously shows, humans can be worse off in tailwind than in headwind. Whether for good or ill, any human endeavor has delusion as its Achilles heel, so when Christian starts appropriating the congratulatory sentiments of “us”—and even of his major critic—he unwittingly begins to dig his own

grave, which Andersen's narrative wittingly notes with unmistakable irony. Christian's concert lasted close to midnight, "and it is only in that sense it can be said [about the pleasures it entailed] that they were sustained in the long run." The author, who unjustifiably interfered on his character's behalf by elevating him to the pedestal where only the immortal spirit belongs, is the same author who justifiably undercuts this position as driven by wishful thinking (by himself as well as his character). Andersen flirts with the world of the *Bildungsroman* but also drives nails into its coffin.

Between this rock and hard place, there is no harmonious resolution to be found, and *Only a Fiddler's* artistic integrity is located precisely in the inescapable and irresolvable manifestations of its damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't dilemma. Taking off from a scene with Christian at his mother's sick-bed, "we" exclaims: "It was so dismal, so cold in the narrow attic where his mother was dozing; therefore we must fly away from it, away from the cold air, from the deep sighs, fly to grand, magnificent halls, in the warm South, seek Naomi, and we are in Rome, the city of memories, 'the Colosseum of the world.'" It may sound like a nice escape, but its subtext is not sound; it is as desperate as escapism. And when later Naomi admits to wishing Ladislaus dead, and a character named Bettina tries to mitigate such sentiments by making this metaphorical distinction: "Our thoughts are the flowers, but our actions are the fruits of the flowers," then the narrative "we" agrees—with the important reservation "that not all flowers bear fruit, most do most often collapse into nothing." And this nothing can be sought with spectacular vengeance.

Shortly before the novel ends by featuring the symbolically accidental encounter between Christian in his pauper's coffin and the living dead Naomi in her elegant carriage—set in Danish nature and atmosphere—"we" are, with Naomi, in Paris' Tivoli, bursting with light and sound, teeming with actors and spectators, and "we want out into this jingling maelstrom"; as "we" at least manage to observe it, hidden and from a distance, "we" notice and fixate upon the eyes of a fallen man, the once irresistible Ladislaus, who brought crowds to shout with joy, but is now lying here, "ill, despised, forgotten," his worn-out traits showing "that the soul like a bat only haunts in the ruins of a body."

Our sequence of "we" manifestations thus concludes with the striking premonition that not only is *Only a Fiddler's* world coming apart, but each and every part of it is coming to an end. When Andersen minces words it is in order not to mince words about that fact. In connecting the dots—

the individual characters— his narrating “we” also fills in for an integral, immortal soul; but in doing both, “we” reveal “our” limited capacity. “We” are the site of the novel’s knowledge, but whether or not “we” know it, “our” knowledge is in practice as counterproductive as it is productive. This used to be called wisdom, and Andersen may be showing more of it in this novel than in its precursors.³¹ Most important, though, is that in the *Fiddler* it takes the form of bookkeeping with double entries, revealing that what the world wants, it cannot have, and what it has, it does not want; a sobering testimony, to say the least. So, what’s next?

IV. *To Be or Not to Be—Oneself*

Most of *Only a Fiddler’s* double entries relate to the tension and interaction between Christian and Naomi, and most other characters and narrative devices are invested in this existential drama, which dates back to the two’s childhood as playmates. Officially Christian’s parents are a tailor with wanderlust and his wife Maria, who had earlier been attracted to a farmer’s son, and whose attachment to her husband remains in doubt. In fact, after her husband’s apparent death, Maria—to Christian’s despair—unflinchingly marries a heartless brother of the farmer’s son.

Naomi, meanwhile, was initially raised by her maternal grandfather, until a fire breaks out in his house, killing him and nearly also killing his granddaughter, had she not been saved by the town’s Norwegian rogue musician, who also happens to be Christian’s godfather. After the disaster Naomi is moved from her grandfather’s house and placed under the care of Count Frits, in whose parents’ house her mother Sara once served as a governess until she engaged in an illicit affair with the young count (who was sent abroad by his father because of the episode). During the affair the Norwegian rogue allegedly impersonated the count and illicitly fathered Naomi, Sara’s daughter, after which the governess killed herself, as Frits, her true lover, was unwilling to assume fatherhood. Nevertheless, he gladly accepts the role as Naomi’s foster father (and she the one as his “daughter”) without compromising his disdain for the Norwegian.³² It is Frits who accompanies her on her important trip to Italy, and it is his house to which she and her French husband are on their way when they cross paths with

³¹ See Sven Møller Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros. Studier i den danske romantik*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1966, p. 183.

³² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 156-7.

Christian's coffin on the novel's last page.

These intertwined and conflicted life stories correspond to the dichotomy of "our" epic narration. "This cleavage of two, who could have complemented one another and reached completeness in life and art, is the novel's idea," says Mogens Brøndsted, and adds: "Neither one of the two attitudes is posited as absolute right, it is an irreconcilable inner conflict"; art points to the shadowy side of life—and to the threat it presents to the bright side—and as a novel about an artist, informed by the author's experiences with his personal shadows, *Only a Fiddler* "is deeply divided and problematized."³³ In fact, the proximity between the homegrown Danish Christian and the exotic Naomi only magnifies what separates them; opposition that easily cows his pliable stay-at-home character only triggers the defiance of her wandering Jew.³⁴ When Sven Møller Kristensen deems this novel Andersen's most daring, it is precisely because of its even-handed focus on two opposing characters—and oppositions within each of them, we might add—a gesture which conforms with Kristensen's take on Romantic dualism at large. Central to his analysis is its decoding of the avian symbolism. Christian's deference to environmental adversities, despite his artistic gifts, is compared to the plight of a wing-shot bird and to the ugly duckling's distrust in its true identity.³⁵

Not only Naomi posits an alternative to this defeatism. So does Christian's godfather, perhaps not incidentally, as he likely is Naomi's biological father. In bird language his notion of the human has the animal inside, and not as a vulnerable bird, but an irrepressibly wild one. And the moral impositions on the individual by the powers that be are dethroned as well; "it's all a matter of custom.—Who knows if the animal inside us isn't more right than humans who merely follow received wisdom!"³⁶ On the other hand, the destructive downside of this perspective is on display as well, as Christian himself witnesses among the ghostly whores in Copenhagen, earlier compared to repulsive reptiles worthy of empathy, but now embraced even more decisively as tokens of humanity at large: "There is something tragically shaking in seeing human nature humiliated to the animal, and there, in its destruction, realize it was created in God's image."³⁷

³³ Brøndsted, "Efterskrift," p. 284-5; see also pp. 281 and 283.

³⁴ See Brøndsted, "Efterskrift," p. 289.

³⁵ See Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 175-9.

³⁶ See Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 182; cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 66.

³⁷ See Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 184; cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 124.

As for Naomi herself, her characteristic distinction, from the lame Christian in particular, is her insistence upon being—herself! Neither patriot nor Christian, but freethinker and freedom-fixated in equal measure, she epitomizes the defiant vitalist. Though not demonic, if confronted, this highfalutin idealist and fan of Napoleon rather turns from love to hatred than to compromise. Combined with her sexual ambiguity, says Møller Kristensen, these personality traits, which her own era found destructive, foreshadow a respectable modern individualism, the dire consequences for which she was even prepared to pay dearly.³⁸ Even more significant, however, is what Kristensen adds to the contrast between Naomi, whose “soul is lost” and who pays for her “brief moments of pleasure ... with her peace of mind and her hope of salvation,” and Christian, “who has missed out on all earthly happiness but gained eternal life instead.” The addition includes that Andersen’s novel doesn’t actually present its case all that clearly, as “doubt and question marks float in the air.” Compassion follows the novel’s depiction of Christian, the lame bird, while more respect seems invested in its portrayal of Naomi, the wild bird, though it is Christian who, in the end, and in tune with the values of the time, is granted the prospects of eternal bliss.³⁹

Still, the narrative’s balancing acts remain in doubt, especially in light of some of the epigraphs heading all of its chapters. After probing these signs of uncertainty, Møller Kristensen cautiously concludes that if harmony and equilibrium in *Only a Fiddler* are to be found, it must be between its two lead characters. Each one “moves in the wrong direction, towards extremes that bring disappointment,” but while Christian exuded trust in the spiritual, Naomi does it in the human; piety and power go together, as Oehlenschläger would have it.⁴⁰ Talking, however, about questionable clarity, as this scholar does, it is not entirely clear whether his attempt to secure some integral closure for Andersen’s novel amounts to a frail, but actual presence of such a property, or whether as the novel’s interpreter he locates merely a novelistic ideal.

³⁸ Cf. Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, pp. 187-92; as to Naomi’s sexual identity, Heinrich Detering writes that “Andersen succeeds in presenting the homoerotic existence ... so that it, in itself, can become a pattern for every outsider existence. It starts with Naomi being not only a sexual “amfibium” and so representing a sexual minority, but also being a Jewess” Heinrich Detering, “*Intellectual Amphibia.*” *Homoerotisk Camouflage in Hans Christian Andersen’s Work*, Odense: Odense Universitet/H.C. Andersen-Centret 1991, p. 60.

³⁹ Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 193.

⁴⁰ Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 195.

The uncertainty that remains is significant and deserves further investigation. Even other scholars suggest as much. For instance, Per Stig Møller concludes his analysis of *Only a Fiddler* by claiming, “Naomi and Christian fell apart when they lost the center of life, the harmonious community of male and female.”⁴¹ Nothing here suggests any substitute for lost center and harmony, like the one Møller Kristensen envisaged. Preceding his direr conclusion, Stig Møller also characterizes both protagonists more harshly. Both scholars stress Christian’s godfather’s—and his likely daughter Naomi’s—affinity to wild animals (bloodhounds, some horses, etc.), and her untamed sexuality as well, and both exempt Naomi from her rapist-father’s demonic side. But Møller Kristensen’s mitigating words about Naomi’s freedom-loving idealism are not echoed by Stig Møller. To him her sexuality and materialism are slippery slopes to death and evil: “In Naomi Eros and Thanatos are connected. She is pure desire, egoist and without caritas (compassionate neighborly love), which is typical for her social class, the upper class, and like it, she is completely without appreciation for the arts, which by contrast Christian, and the bourgeoisie, possess.”⁴²

Not only are center and harmony decisively missing in Stig Møller’s reading of Andersen’s novel. But the complications within Christian and Naomi individually, and within their relation to each other, are fraught with other problems than the ones Møller Kristensen extracted. Naomi’s sensuality was a power she held that later absorbed her to the extent she became its victim, an activity gone haywire. Passivity works on Christian in like manner as he expected life and happiness to come to him in an unknown future. Naomi was too self-made for her own good, Christian too little self-made for *his* own good. Each fell victim to one-sidedness: passivity, sexless femininity, bright ideals, in his case; activity, sensuous masculinity, raw reality, in hers. As a consequence, when his art deceives him, Christian counts on God in its place; and when materialism deceives Naomi, the result is nihilism. I would add that while both instinctively seek to become themselves, they each in their own way fail to mature to the point of heeding what the Danish poet Jakob Knudsen in 1907 expressed succinctly: “to be oneself is to be one with another self.”⁴³ Naomi’s powerful

⁴¹ Per Stig Møller, *Erotismen. Den romantiske bevægelse i Vesteuropa 1790-1860*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1973, p. 136.

⁴² Møller, *Erotismen*, p. 133.

⁴³ Cited here from Jakob Knudsen, *At være sig selv*, ed. by Ole Wivel, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1965, p. 126

vitalism led her to outer success but inner disharmony, while Christian's rejection of vitalism led him to outer misfortune and inner loss of happiness; his trust in the spiritual resonates even less with Stig Møller than it did with Møller Kristensen.

While the latter found Andersen's novel daring because of its infection with the dangers of late Romanticism,⁴⁴ the former rather sees it as a plea for a safe escape from this condition. By rejecting nineteenth-century Romanticism and idealism alike, it (and the earlier *Improvvisatore*) offers a Danish expression of *Biedermeier* culture by aiming for the ideal of a balance "which in no case is elevated to the level of a harmony, a higher view of world or life, but is merely a practical, sound sense of community to the satisfaction of the citizenry and the blessing of God in the church."⁴⁵ A mundane, low-key and modest afterglow of the *Bildungsroman* and its spiritual pretenses thus seems the boldest possible implication of Andersen's experience. Compared to his earlier novel in this vein, *Only a Fiddler* has even lowered the bar for its ideal's implementation. Only secondary characters, like the man Peter Wik and the women Luzie and Steffen Karet, come close to escaping their splendid isolation and to reaching the novel's goal.

A modified version of an adage (wrongly) attributed to Kierkegaard captures Andersen's overall stance: The expectation of pleasure may not be the greatest of all, but it is surely the best to be had. It shows on the final pages of part I as a splendor doubled by mirrors, surrounding Naomi, reiterated later, but observed entirely from the outside by the unfortunate Christian.⁴⁶ As Møller Kristensen notes about the same Christian's last words, in which this humiliated man continues to express an unwavering faith in eternal life: "one senses a bitterness between the lines" and "a twilight hovers over the novel's entire final chapter."⁴⁷ Villy Sørensen seems to state the same from a different angle: happiness is sheer wishful thinking in Andersen's early novels—in *Only a Fiddler* not even that—yet "to be 'happy' means being wholly oneself."⁴⁸ Self-realization, in other words, is not an option in these texts, but is it anywhere? Andersen's final fictional reply to Kierkegaard's critique of his fiddler and *Fiddler* alludes to happiness in the very title of the retort: the fairy tale "The Galoshes of Fortune." Whether the prospects for

⁴⁴ Cf. Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 171.

⁴⁵ Møller, *Erotismen*, p. 135.

⁴⁶ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 103-4.

⁴⁷ Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 181.

⁴⁸ Sørensen, "Om H.C. Andersens romaner," pp. 147-8 and 153.

the self are better in the fairy tale genre will be part of my discussion of this specimen below.

For now the challenge is to assess the dubious outcome of Naomi and Christian's dual failures in Andersen's third novel. Mogens Brøndsted shows how both end up as lost souls, complementary only in terms of their definitive shortcomings. His crippling fear of danger and her reckless flirt with danger leave both deprived of their respective goals in life. His failure as an artist, and her slips from bold freedom fighter into superficial social performer, are both incommensurate with moral depth, without which the values each espouses are compromised. Therefore, as tragedy normally signifies confirmation of values only as they lose currency, it seems problematic to label the conclusion of Andersen's novel tragic. That is, however, how Brøndsted terms it in his Postscript, first in a headline, "The tragedy of art," then in a section about "The liberated woman," concluding that here "Andersen for the first and last time allowed himself a tragic or disharmonious ending of a novel."⁴⁹

The juxtaposition "tragic or disharmonious" is a bit puzzling. Are the two meant to be synonymous or mutually exclusive? If the latter, I have just argued against tragic (and disharmonious is not in question). If the former, could tragedy be a quality of disharmony in itself—the value of fragmented interrelationships and other narrative disconnections, say—rather than a marker of individual protagonists' fate? Isn't the gist of the reflections on *Only a Fiddler* presented up to this point that the novel is an inescapable disunity? Perhaps, but if that were to be called tragic, would it not diminish the tragedy that its value is so wiggly that it requires, and is granted, a scaffolding or infrastructure for its support that resembles a downgraded template for the immortally spirited art- and *Bildungsroman*? My hunch is that such value discussions do not serve the text in question at all, as they might require "tragic" to be substituted by "pathetic."

At issue is, for instance, whether the radical disharmonies to which Andersen authoritatively gives voice are not at risk of being unduly domesticated by the *Biedermeier* composition undergirding them or imposed upon them. One thing is whether this bourgeois safety net is at all durable (to say nothing of respectable) for any but some minor characters, given the absence of realized selfhood the net is safe-guarding—or whether it is mainly a half-hearted means of keeping up appearances. Another, and more important, thing is whether any genre measures motivated by

⁴⁹ Brøndsted, "Efterskrift," p. 290; see also pp. 286-8.

comfort or safety considerations are artistically justifiable. Should even the *Bildungsroman* with its claims to an immortally spirited life-view be considered a safe haven? Isn't the trademark of real ambiguities that they do not come to an end, good or tragic?

Put differently, it is *Only a Fiddler's* highpoint that its display of an artist failing is unailing—and thus not tragic. It is the art of shooting oneself in the foot yet continuing to walk (at least limp). Why it succeeds on this score is because Andersen's Hans Christian is sufficiently similar to and different from his Christian to make the latter damage himself while keeping the former going. Andersen may be reluctant to surrender to the anarchy of his fictional universe, for he knows full well that neither its excessive centrifugality (Naomi) nor its centripetality (Christian) can be tamed by even the most well-intended coaching from the sidelines by any ever so Olympic *pluralis majestatis* narrator. Thus he resigns himself as an author to providing minimal lip service to orderliness in the form of his *Biedermeier* scheme, a measure well below the commanding, but outdated standard of Kierkegaard (and writers similarly invested in responses to the Danish Golden Age crisis). I shall later argue that the otherwise thin-skinned Andersen's chiefly sensible response to Kierkegaard's critique of him as a novelist is likely to draw its strength from his assurance of being artistically on the right side of history.

V. Being All and Sundry—Yet Going Under

Heinrich Detering, in his text about "*Intellectual Amphibia.*" *Homoerotic Camouflage in Hans Christian Andersen's Works* credits Kierkegaard's review of *Only a Fiddler* with being the first to note this "most daring attempt" by Andersen "to describe through camouflage his own homoerotic existence"; at the same time Detering blames Kierkegaard for not appreciating the significance of the camouflage by decoding it, but rather treating it as "an aesthetic flaw" and a sign of the author's immaturity, "or rather, his lack of personality." Not so, says Detering; Kierkegaard's comparison of Andersen's life as an author "with those flowers which have male and female placed on the same stalk" is to Detering "an exact translation of what Hans Christian Andersen calls 'intellectual amphibium.'" And when Kierkegaard accuses Andersen of lacking "an outlook on life," he is wrong again. "On the contrary: *his outlook on life is inherent in the recognition of this ambiguity*, which he knew in himself—and in all those 'productive

effects,' which are based on this, and which emerge in very different ways throughout his writings: like the conflict between dream and reality, art and life, myth and the novel."⁵⁰

Was Andersen straight or gay? That discussion has been going on for a century, and though Detering contributes to it as well, it will not be dealt with here, where my focus will be instead on the claim that Andersen's work despite its ambiguousness is not devoid of life-view or outlook. This may ultimately be a question of semantics and usage. If outlook is defined as a spiritually unifying attitude, as Kierkegaard does, it obviously must conflict with an admittedly ambiguous textual universe. If, by contrast, an outlook is seen as an artistic gesture that allows an author to take ownership of his narrative, no matter which, through his narration, then obviously the disparate character of *Only a Fiddler* is no obstacle to that gesture either. Outlook or no outlook, such hairsplitting aside, what Detering's comments point out is "the intellectual amphibium," engendered by homoeroticism that occasions much, if not all, of the novel's disjointed fabric. With the sexually ambiguous Naomi at the epicenter of this decentered phenomenology, one senses a system in the madness by which most all and sundry goes under.

A pivotal moment in Naomi's trajectory occurs at the end of the three-part novel's second part. In a no-holds-barred eruption she throws herself at the mercy of Ladislaus, the one person she never hated. Her love of him is uncompromising and to the death, the climax of her freewheeling pursuit, defiant of home, place, and tradition, even conventional sexual identity. The moment of ecstasy transcends all else, life as such included, and the ultimate freedom—and happiness—lies in putting freedom itself at risk. Living in conformity is slow dying, while even death at the hands of Ladislaus would be life at its best. The intensity is norm breaking, and jealousy from both sides, plus flawlessly executed cross-dressing from Naomi's, only spice the mix. If not sadomasochism, this is a vitality that borders on self-destruction, rather than self-realization; it is not of this world, but an art of the impossible, utterly spontaneous, yet staged, life at its core, yet tangential to it, as we—and she—know it.⁵¹ Thus Utopia meets Dystopia.

Naomi's dangerously ambiguous, high-wired relation with Ladislaus extends into the novel's third part. The couple's masquerades and mutual toying with sexual identity here grows so bestial that the poisonous interaction transgresses the very boundary between life and death, eventually

⁵⁰ Detering, "Intellectual Amphibia," pp. 58-9; italics mine.

⁵¹ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 198-9.

foreboding these exotic characters being locked in a deadly embrace. As for Naomi, her relentless search for happiness, ideally the key to selfhood, proves self-destructive.⁵² The consequences are dire. As birds of a feather, she and her male obsession, each geographically and emotionally uprooted, accidentally end their relation on a journey together, though now under a cloud of unapologetic vindictiveness and hostility and not least a gender-defiant self-alienation on Naomi's part.⁵³

Her vitality remains evident, but in the form of an undiminished hatred and killer instinct; like another Napoleon she relishes in the brutality of the myth of progress, while admitting its demonic temptation is eerily resonant with her psyche. An intensely torn revolutionary, she is a gambler with life whose inner contradictions amount to a sickness unto death. Her disharmonies are vibrant and not negotiable, eventually self-consuming as well. While hostile to being subsumed under any spiritual supremacy, narrative or otherwise, and immune to even emotional humiliation by her marquis husband of easy virtue, there is no avoiding the fact, as he mercilessly reminds her, that she had it all coming! For all her revolutionary fervor, Naomi's chickens have come home to roost.⁵⁴

Many of them were hatched in the company or within sight of Christian. Even though he was marginalized, especially in the novel's last part and partly by her deadening exuberance, he was privy to her insentience from as far back as her grandfather's death. Later, after sharing moments of anxiety that frightened her secular (but not his god-fearing) mind, he is left confounded, having witnessed her subsequent art of repressing discomfort. A significant gap between the two protagonists is opening—between her focused selfishness and convenient oblivion and his eclectic imagination and simple honesty—and following the collapse of his dreams and hopes in the wake of a social downturn, it soon widens to separate the amoral aesthete in her from the emotional weakling in him. Secondary characters both complicate and clarify matters as this schism widens. The empathy of Luzie, a young woman restored to health after bouts of madness, thus sustains Christian in the emotional vacuum Naomi has left him, yet does so as a realist who accepts life for what it is. He, by contrast, is an idealist who rather takes it for what it could be; admits to everyday anxieties, yet daydreams of having courage in greater risk zones; fears the cow next door,

⁵² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 211-3.

⁵³ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 215, 218-20, and 225.

⁵⁴ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 243, 256-7, 260-5.

but not the African tiger (sic!). Pie in the sky is his diet, not earthbound Luzie's.⁵⁵

Instead of approaching Christian to Naomi, whose aims are larger than life, these trademarks only highlight his inferiority. What sounded idealistic was but a wimpy escapism driven by fear of the slightest concrete responsibility. Naomi's beastly fortune-hunting knows no limits. Neither a moral core nor a sexual identity will stand in the way of this femme fatale's relentless pursuit of a life-consuming and life-defying agenda. Unlike Luzie's sensitive realism, homesteaded even in alien soil, Naomi's cold romanticism is rootless even in the midst of the familiar, a daredevil's godless but all-transcending impetus, defying every nook and cranny of timid Christian's religiously tinged but pale idealism. All that these opposite positions share is an underlying discomfort, which neither one succeeds in alleviating, but which accounts for an attraction between them that literally defies reason. Despite Luzie's compassion for him, and Naomi's humiliation of him, it is the latter Christian finds irresistible, not the former; Naomi's "lovely Medusa head did not petrify, but melted his heart, whereas *Luzie* only struck with horror and fear."⁵⁶ Nothing is as frightening—to both Christian and Naomi—as the sign of a lackluster reality. That fear is their single bond, and so it is destined to break. All departures from a fragmented world are destined for further fragmentation.

It is this irreparably torn nexus that underlies and saturates Andersen's extensive narrative; it aggravates most of the conflicts that erupt and motivates the attempts at band-aiding them by the *pluralis majestatis* narrator, and consistently undercuts its multifaceted reach. Both Christian and Naomi are dreamers defiant of a reality that produced them both—as was the man who godfathered the former and fathered the latter—yet Christian inadvertently remains reality's shy copycat, while Naomi boldly takes off into fairy-tale land. A (other) persona is the magnet attracting her, while he keeps searching for the person (that remains) behind the mask. Her recipe enables her to rid herself both of her Norwegian (father's) identity and of the Christian discrimination against her other identity, that of a Jew. It takes blatant hypocrisy for her to administer the identity change, yet she eschews Christian's escapist idealism, in fact, gladly distances herself from his whining, and like Ismael, who was hated by all, proudly embraces crushing loneliness and a life of chaos without hope of resurrection or salvation. Well

⁵⁵ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 27, 110-6, 121-6, 129-30, and 146-7.

⁵⁶ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 188; see also pp. 149-53 and 185-7.

aware of aiming at her own foot, she still pulls the trigger. However, when she needs her disguise the most, she notes a pitiful character that reminds her of Christian and awakens her affinity. After all, her masked defiance of the same reality he so openly and embarrassingly succumbed to has not taken her much farther than him. If he was angst in person, she was angst of facing her person—stripped of its cloaking persona, often borrowed for the occasion, whether from her haughty mother or from the timorous Christian. In the end, both protagonists prove angsty and unable to transform their respective experiences into selves taking ownership of their world.⁵⁷

Torn to the core is Christian in his own way as well. His spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. While his medial condition has a psychosomatic component—bridging the spirit-flesh divide—this in no way diminishes the scale of his mental fissures.⁵⁸ I've already twice alluded to the difference between his mentality and Luzie's, but a third dimension is that she has overcome madness, but he still has it coming to him, albeit in some artsy guise that later carries him away—until sensations of a lifeless reality kick in all the harder.⁵⁹ Mad or not, both Luzie and Christian were always prone to creative dreaming, but in his case the disposition is enhanced beyond the real by the impetus of his godfather.⁶⁰ In addition to noting Christian's hard landing in reality after his dreamy flight, the stamp of approval he receives from this elderly double-murderer and suicide must be mentioned. A charismatic wolf in sheep's clothing, whose adventurous life is completely shrouded in darkness,⁶¹ his immoral terms of endearment sit much better with Naomi, his illegitimate daughter, than with his godson—who is treated to the tenets of the man's gospel at Christian's last visit to his home—which altogether makes this father figure one of *Only a Fiddler's* major fragmentation bombs. As mentioned earlier, universal morality, by his account, is out, cultural relativity in; everything goes, bestiality included, if only authorized by some custom.⁶²

Step by step Christian is torn to shreds, most positively when sitting in his attic, virgin shaped hoar-frost forming on the window, and he is reminded of a similar situation seven years earlier, when the appearance

⁵⁷ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 156, 160-2, 171, 173-5, 219, and 240.

⁵⁸ Cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 40-2, 44, 46, 150-1.

⁵⁹ For her troubles, see Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 53-7 and 146; for Christian's (artistic) madness, see p. 75; and for his reawakening to a soulless reality, see p. 81.

⁶⁰ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 54 and 187.

⁶¹ See reference in note 58 to Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 81.

⁶² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 69-70 and 66.

of the cold woman of death preceded the demise two months later of the room's elderly male inhabitant. Given his own youth, this cannot be the outcome for Christian here and now, so "in the midst of loss and a future outlook without hope, his desire for life awakens; he grabbed his violin, and starvation and cold were forgotten to the soft melodies." But the genius in the attic is no powerful trope in this novel, and despite the support of the narrating "we," Christian's musical talent ends up serving the parvenu class, people of glamorous but hollow tastes who only nurture his illusion that his misery is a fortune. Adding harm to injury, the support and reception he receives from prominent members of the petty bourgeois dramatic society muddles this mixed blessing even further. Ultimately, as mentioned earlier, even "we" must take Christian's self-congratulations with a grain of salt to simply uphold the narrative's integrity.⁶³

The gap between Christian and the real world opens incessantly, and towards the end it is clear that his fortune is not to be found in this world, but in a religious faith that smells both revivalist and Catholic. Even so, his aspirations to live his life in the blue sky have ended in dirt grey, not even in "a simple, cheerful, active life on earth";⁶⁴ all human community that is left for him is Naomi, a woman of whom he can just dream, and dream in vain at that.⁶⁵ As part of this lowering of expectations to the bare minimum, his trajectory remains obstinately self-destructive in more ways than the personal. Even his onetime self-defining dreams of genius and spiritual power have been trashed in favor of dreams about a general beauty on earth to which he will never be a party;⁶⁶ a striking tribute to a pleasure that does not reach beyond expectation. The conventional color for hope is green, but Christian has higher hopes! "Isn't the morning's rebirth of night far more allegorical?" he asks, not realizing that the brighter color only spells the end of hope. When he first observes its burning sheen, it turns out to stem from the devastating fire in Naomi's home next door that consumed her grandfather and exiled her. And when the "hope's fiery purple" reemerges before his eyes years later—symbolically as reflected in colored glass as

⁶³ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 228-31.

⁶⁴ The title of a famous poem by the Danish poet N.F.S. Grundtvig, cited here from *100 Poems From the Medieval Period to the Present Day*. *Bilingual edition*, selected and ed. by Thomas Bredsdorff and Anne-Marie Mai, translated by John Irons in cooperation with Klaus Høeck, Copenhagen & Seattle: Museum Tusulanum Press & University of Washington Press 2011, p. 167.

⁶⁵ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 267 and 270-1.

⁶⁶ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 268, 272 and 274.

icy images of frost had been on the window panes—its source is an even deadlier fire that devastates both his stepfather’s farm and life and ruins the future for his mother.⁶⁷

All this is decisively tied to symbolic representation, and not simply to abstract allegory. Andersen scholars across the board have addressed the symbolic role of birds (and other animals) in the author’s work with Møller Kristensen’s reading of *Only a Fiddler*’s contrast between Naomi and Christian as one between freedom and domesticity, or wild and wounded birds, respectively, being but one instance.⁶⁸ More recently Johan de Mylius has tracked the stork as Andersen’s favored symbol of life from the novel’s opening page onwards. Specialized in Andersen’s novels,⁶⁹ but a student of his entire life and oeuvre, de Mylius offers his interpretation of this symbolic bird in *Only a Fiddler* within the context of a book primarily devoted to the poet’s fairy tales. The storks are “the mysterious birds. The mystery of life in itself, life’s return and resurrection in nature. Birth and new beginning. The stork, Andersen’s favorite bird, is thus ... to be considered a visible counter image to death and destruction.”⁷⁰

While this is true—and is evident throughout the novel—it is neither the whole truth nor nothing but the truth. Storks’ resilience is not as unlimited as the words about their mysterious capacity to indicate “life’s return and resurrection in nature” might lead one to believe. While the mother stork burned in her nest with her chicks in the fire at Naomi’s grandfather’s house, the male stork, whether it survived or not, continued to preoccupy Christian’s thoughts, eventually alongside memories of other storks, one in a meadow that enticed him to travel out into the world, “and now the stork, the only living creature he had around him at home in his solitude.”⁷¹ Yet the link between man and stork is no life insurance. Ever since the opening chapter, it has been repeated that even storks kill each other⁷²—perhaps an evolutionary necessity for survival of the fittest but nonetheless a loss of life and especially the kind of life this protagonist lives—and this deadly outcome is precisely what befalls Christian’s current beloved companion. For all this bird’s hypothetical vitality, domestication, following its defeat by

⁶⁷ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 21-24, 41, 166-7, 176.

⁶⁸ Cf. Kristensen, *Den dobbelte Eros*, p. 174; cf. note 35 above.

⁶⁹ His *Habilitationsabhandlung*, titled *Myte og roman: H.C. Andersens romaner mellem romantik og realisme* (1981).

⁷⁰ de Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris*, pp. 299-300.

⁷¹ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 269; see also pp. 9, 11, 17, 23, 47, 78, and 148.

⁷² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 11.

its own species, is a dangerous temptation it cannot resist. What it means for its human protector, he tells his feathered fixation directly: “Now I am alone again! You will not bring spring to me! Dead! Everything must die! Everything we must lose!”⁷³ This is what Christian has left: *carpe diem*. It may sound like a promising acknowledgment of reality, but “the mystery of life in itself”? Perhaps rather a virtue made out of necessity by someone wrecked on a rock!

VI. *Going Places—This Way or That—to No End*

If Christian, despite his best intentions, comes to naught both existentially and symbolically, so does Naomi. For both protagonists the endgame is significantly preceded by travel, but while in Christian’s case such movement predominantly amounts to dreamy mind-travel, Naomi, though no less a dreamer, puts her money where her mouth is *and* her boots on the ground to go from one geographical place to another. Just as the two of them are most profoundly connected by conflict, they also travel in radically different ways and even encounter different types of conflict en route. Andersen himself was, of course, the great and complicated European traveler of his day, crisscrossing Europe on some thirty longer and shorter journeys (not to mention his countless domestic trips and sojourns). I have elsewhere surveyed and reflected on this crucial aspect of his life and career, which resulted in both major travelogues and significant representations in other genres.⁷⁴ Without rehearsing my previous comments on the matter of Andersen as a traveler biographically and artistically, geographically and mentally, let me simply suggest what may be relevant to the present discussion of *Only a Fiddler* (and single texts from two other genres), namely, the question raised by the topos of travel in all his writing: how fictional may his factual prose be, how factual his fiction? Even a superficial reading of *Only a Fiddler* (to say nothing of the earlier *The Improvisatore*) will note passages about travel that seem lifted from biographical accounts or homesteaded in other factual prose, while others are more deeply intertwined with the artistic project (while still beholden to personal experiences).

⁷³ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 273.

⁷⁴ See Poul Houe, “Going Places. Hans Christian Andersen, the Great European Traveler,” in *Hans Christian Andersen. Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, ed. by Sven Hakon Rossel, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi 1996, pp. 126-75; for a Danish version of this text, see Poul Houe, *En anden Andersen—og andres. Artikler og foredrag 1969-2005*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2006, pp. 305-72.

Having said as much about travel, be it in different genres or in the different modes of Christian and Naomi, there is a common denominator that is prevalent. No matter how differently motivated or executed movement in any of these cases and settings may be, circumstances beyond anyone's or anything's control prove decisive to the outcome—and equalizing and devastating beyond the imagination of individual characters and genres. Naomi's travel bug issues from her Jewish heritage, from a people "who must travel in order to be buried," as Christian's mother puts it.⁷⁵ And so it goes for Naomi herself. Her distance to Christianity and patriotism may be part of her Jewish makeup, yet Andersen's solidarity with her character shows in two ways: that they both first arrive in Copenhagen during the pogrom of 1819, and that she like him feels Danish but more fundamentally a citizen of the (European) world.⁷⁶ But then her bug gets wings and like a migratory bird carries her to both geographical and mental locales—even confluences of the two—that were out of her author's biographical reach, yet are still within the range of Jewish cultural history, at least as he perceived it. Via sites on Andersen's personal travel map, such as Vienna and Paris, this fictive offspring of his and Ahasverus goes Hindu! As mentioned earlier, she even flocks together with Ladislaus, this other unruly bird of a feather, to extend her excitement about geographical freedom into the realm of sexual lability.⁷⁷

Temptations to settle for less do not sit well with Naomi. On tour to Vienna with the count she considers her foster father, the couple is joined by a doctor, who relishes in the foreign—so long as it reminds him of home and the familiar. When the count entices her to settle down, she adamantly resists and defiantly accepts her alien and incompatible station in life. Truth told, as the narrative tells it, her frankness is a bit gratuitous. When she had poked a group of snobbish French patriots in the eye with her heretic cosmopolitanism earlier in the narrative, she was already known as a social outcast who had nothing to lose by such erratic behavior. Neither her natural talent nor her pride is in doubt, but neither is her self-delusion about the moral rectitude in which she clads these attitudes. For all her passion, both its direction and ambiguous nature repeatedly overpower her ever so nimble identity masquerades and checkmate her control measures.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 25.

⁷⁶ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 180-3.

⁷⁷ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 203-8.

⁷⁸ Cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 223-5 and 189-95.

Put differently, her freedom does not belong to her; she belongs to it and follows its ins and outs defenselessly. Yet simple home and everyday life is not an option and counts for no more than a point of departure. So off she goes, and the narrative's "we" follows her—to where the adventure may take her and "us"! And where might that be? Surprise, surprise—to an encounter with Christian's poor itinerant father, just another lost soul abroad, whose journeys have led nowhere, but whose greeting "we" at least can return to his and "our" old country—by the stork, who is presently "our" guest. Much ado about nothing is what it all comes down to: adventures that are literally not of this world, but intensely norm-breaking eruptions awaiting a genre—such as the fairy tale—in which they may become, or at least may energize, a world of their own.⁷⁹ I shall return to this point below.

For now, let us briefly follow Christian on his seemingly different travel route. Like Naomi, he wants to try his good fortune abroad, but no unruliness or transgressions like hers move or shake him, no uncontrollable passion. Yet in a sense they are in the same boat, and that boat is *the accidental*, to which both succumb in the final analysis. A heavily narrated chapter in *Only a Fiddler's* first part—almost emulating a chapter in a *Bildungsroman*—frames a discourse about Christian's flesh and spirit, his potentials in life and art, with almost essayistic reflections on the human condition more generally. One sentence, about a stillborn child coming miraculously to life, reads like a preamble to Christian's future: "Were it perhaps the tones that drew his soul back, in order that he could work here on Earth, or was it mere accident, this Solomonic sword of rational man?"⁸⁰ De Mylius rightly notes that Andersen is a rarity among his Danish contemporaries in his "operating with accident as a (negative or positive) factor in existence"; he even compares "the fate that Andersen let happen to the poor violin talent Christian in the novel *Only a Fiddler*" to a story about "the meaningless accidents that steer a human being's life towards the abyss." Precisely this meaninglessness, he adds, was what Kierkegaard in his critique of Andersen's novel found most offensive.⁸¹

Now, what does this accidental scheme of things—or lack of scheme—add up to in Christian's case? The impetus he received early on from his tailor father was clearly deceptive. Traveling with his parents, Christian hears his father—inspired, even he, by the flight of a stork—go into lamentations

⁷⁹ Cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 195-9.

⁸⁰ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 44.

⁸¹ See de Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris*, pp. 83, 326 and 328.

about the failure of his favorite stork to return, the one whose nest on the Jewish house was burnt along with its chicks. Unless it has died, it is “still on a journey to forget them. God forgive me! I do believe that on a journey one can get over any loss.”⁸² As it turns out, the opposite holds true. Temptations to escape loss by way of travel are irresistible for the tailor, who admits that “now I am home again, and so I suffer from unrest, longing is my thing, desire to travel the pillow I rest my head on”;⁸³ but the result is only graver loss—both of what the traveler leaves behind and what he was hoping to gain abroad in its stead. A later narrative comment suggests as much: “The home language, heard in a foreign country, has the same impact on the heart as childhood melodies have on an elderly person.”⁸⁴

In Christian’s case the feeling of homelessness already instills itself as he moves into the home of his farmer stepfather; and later meeting his real father, who was thought to be dead, on a festive occasion, does not unequivocally alleviate the pain. Even after his resurrection, as it were, the tailor believes he lives in the moment, yet for that to happen, he remains obsessed with always being in other places than where he actually is.⁸⁵ Travel is his magic wand, but given its built-in contradictions, it comes as no surprise that his thoughts wildly surpass what he himself is able to verbalize. So, in his stead, the narrative “we” speaks for him with a voluminous eloquence that deserves to be entertained *in extenso*:

If the road to *salvation*, which our natural as well as positive religion promises us, leads from Earth to a higher star and from the latter to an even more developed and for us more suitable, then all life unfolding becomes one large journey of exploration, a migration from city to city towards the heavenly Jerusalem. Our journeys here on Earth are a simple but graphic image of this larger flight. One makes acquaintances, and friends, from whom one separates teary-eyed as it feels bitterly sad never to meet again; we are compelled to be together for hours and days with people, who are a pain in the neck to us, and later, after our separation, they appear to us as entertaining originals; what caused us the greatest sorrows and anxieties become simply radiant points. From the heavenly city, the goal of our striving, we might be gazing at a starry sky, where between the shining points even this Earth of ours is to be found; we recognize it as the home of our early life, and all memories, such as childhood memories, we seem to recall. Wonder where they

⁸² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 47.

⁸³ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 50 and 52.

⁸⁴ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 58.

⁸⁵ Cf. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 73, 137, 140 and 142.

arenow, those with whom my best hours there were inseparably shared. Well, no matter where they are, they will remember the same hours and, like me, be looking forward to the reunion. We point to another planet, a world of a higher upbringing, and recall the years lived there. In the same way, down here on Earth, we look back upon a great journey and say, when we consider the map: "Paris! Yes, I was there four months! Rome, there I was half a year!" and we feel a yearning for those we came to know dearly and had to separate from, *but this yearning does not frustrate our happiness at this moment. On Eternity's great journey we should not be learning to love a few people on a given location only, we are not Earth dwellers, but citizens of the Heavens; the human heart must not be a comet, whose beams point in one direction only, but must be a sun beaming with equal clarity in all directions. These were the thoughts that, with less clarity only, filled Christian's father and offered him a kind of resignation.*⁸⁶

The passage is remarkable in several respects. First, it does perform what its self-reflective last paragraph claims about Christian's father in the third person: that these thoughts are indeed his, yet are clearly expressed by the epic narrator, not by himself.⁸⁷ Significant elements are consistent with the personal experiences of the fictive tailor and further display an overall realism that is most likely grounded in personal experiences of the author. But this down-to-earth stratum is then elevated to a religious-philosophical level that is meant to endow it with a perspective and meaning it doesn't reveal in and of itself. More precisely, apparent inner contradictions on the first level are supposedly resolved on the second, which intersperses the whole quotation but predominate in its latter part, which I have italicized. The main contradiction to be solved is between the momentary and the eternal, to which end earthly limitation and one-sidedness is subsumed under an omniscient heavenly cosmology, and the means to that harmonizing and synthesizing lies in changing the symbolic representation of the human being from a short-lived and one-way beaming comet to a heavenly sun, beaming for eternity in all directions. The physical reaches for the metaphysical, which, in turn, supposedly takes in the physical.

In light of this narratively guided interpretation, all discrepancies

⁸⁶ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 143; italics, except for the opening *salvation*, are mine.

⁸⁷ In the last part of the novel, in Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 222, Naomi says to the poet Castelli that "most poets have only the one advantage to other people that they can better recall and apply, better express what these feel and think!" The epic narrator of p. 143 seems to tell by her standard.

within the actual characters' lived experience fall harmoniously into place. On the journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem, which the narrative thus performs stylistically and rhetorically, a mundane sense of loss and separation are healed. As we on Earth are but a point in the large universe, so are our momentary experiences, like dots waiting to be interconnected within a higher and larger perspective, which here is memory. In memory all particulars and their mutual contradictions are overcome and healed, as when people we actually couldn't stand when we really were with them return in light of our recollection to become indispensable partners in life.

At the same time as the momentary is secured a consoling place in the big picture, the consolation is double-edged. It not simply drowns the particular in a soothing context, it makes this context return a value to the particular this might not seem to have had in itself, but which memory shows was inherent in it. And there is one more reversible trait to note. As the religious context and its spiritual elevation turn transient particular experiences into durable memory, this memory's eternal properties get both validated and authenticated by embracing stories, situations, and sentiments ingrained in actually lived human existence. And not in any privileged sense. The sense that one person has of an elevated and lasting interconnection with another in memory's light, that sense is shared by this other person so that earthly humans by way of their capacity for memory and spiritual enrichment enter an ever-widening and deepening community. Simply put, actual journeys are indispensable for the ultimate journey of life—and vice versa!

These are notions vaguely and superficially indebted to Romanticism and Christian idealism alike, and as a stilted attempt at sophistication, the phraseological mix is further muddled by the way academic discourse overlaps with Andersen's largely fictional agenda; the question raised earlier, how fictional the factual is, and how factual the fictional is under Andersen's auspices, has truly come home to roost. Rigorous philosophy and conceptualization were never this author's strong suit, and besides, his endeavor to have his narrative "we" buttress personal attitudes and characteristics admittedly too demanding for conveyance through self-expression by the fictional person in question, leaves the impression of artistic weakness and subjugation to conventions that his novel otherwise doesn't share.

On the other hand, even if the reasoning behind the entire design is flawed, the proof may well be in the pudding. Moreover, there is considerable artistic courage to be found in his narrative's struggle to unify its lofty scheme

with elementary human experiences, rather than seeking to have the former simply override the latter. This confirms what other observations have amply suggested, namely, that Andersen is an outlier, inclined toward modernity but unwilling or unable to break categorically with the past. Instead, his modernism is chiefly and most genuinely to be seen in the honest failings of his most well-intended, labored, if half-hearted, efforts to keep the modern at bay.

The evidence is as striking as the pudding—which is Christian: “His father’s history made him think even more about his own, but in the latter the star of fortune was on the rise. By contrast, his father’s was descending. Still, rise and descent in misfortune are relatives, as is the rise and descent of the sun and the stars. It all depends on where you see it from.”⁸⁸ So, by this account, the tailor father’s traveling way to happiness has been a failure. On the other hand, Christian’s own version of it is not. That is, if he wasn’t pulling the rug underneath both claims by permitting a subjective, almost postmodern relativism to deconstruct the whole modern rational and universal order—precisely the way modernism casts doubt about modernity.

In practice, Christian’s life remains a contradiction in terms as it stays devoted to the very dreams and ideals of hope and fortune its reality dispels. Yet his takeoff seems as promising as he initially predicted. Bright winter frost can stimulate travel, but a certain foggy day with dirty snow does the same: “animated ... his urge to travel, his desire for Romantic adventures. A magic circle of sleet and cold was what his home appeared to him to be, only getting outside and away, then all was sunshine and warmth.—‘Here my fortune will develop only slowly; I will fly away from home, fly away and meet happiness.’”⁸⁹ But how long was Christian in the air? Not for very long. A Romantic meeting with Naomi gets confused by his late arrival for their clandestine tryst and by her cross-dressing for the fun of it; when he then elaborates on his plan for the future and a lot of fantasy is part of it, while she is not, things go to pot. He pronounced “his whole fantastic view of the world, his firm conviction that he had to test his fortune as an artist abroad, and what a great man he then would turn into,” to which Naomi caustically replies, “You will never become a great man!” She then leaves the room, “refuses to talk any more to him, requested her bill and rushed homeward in the dark night.”

Christian has not met fortune, but a wall. Left behind alone, he now

⁸⁸ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 142.

⁸⁹ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 163.

becomes the point around which Andersen's narrative weaves a fantastic nightly arabesque of extremes: Michelangelo's images of "sinking souls on the day of Judgment" and Raphael's presentation of the Heavenly in its "soft beauty." "The same boldness in painting the extremes: despair and hope resides in the heart of youth, and the transitions are as precipitous, only the heart of youth mostly favors the bright side." An even denser imaging leads up to the conclusion that in the same way, "the transition in Christian's soul took place this night, while he wandered haphazardly along the labyrinthine by-ways in the direction of Ørebæk,"⁹⁰ his stepfather's farm, precisely as the flames on the horizon are consuming the place.

For all his good plans, Christian is stuck in the maze of life, and as far as the eye can tell, not much good is to be had anywhere on the real horizon—unlike the plethora of Romantic or Christian-idealistic images that so generously supply his mind with building blocks for castles in the air or flower for pie in the sky. His very efforts to escape the accidental and labyrinthine conditions of life take his journey into no man's land. Going places, his way or Naomi's—or the way of both of their dubious fathers'—in the final analysis means going nowhere. And the support the novel's narrative might in turn provide for any one of these endeavors to buttress an orderly or meaningful artistic end product doesn't seal the deal as desired; it only nails the coffin in each and every instance. The encounter between the two protagonists on its last page, one bodily and the other spiritually dead, is of course no accident, although it claims to be. It is rather the sort of staged accident that finally brings to the fore that accidents, which the characters themselves thought they had ruled out in the course of their lives, had actually ruled them.⁹¹

VII. *Time Travel—Tale Telling*

The conclusion above is not entirely negative, not even for the characters involved. But nor is it, as discussed earlier, as positive as a real tragedy. Characters stick to their illusions even after they have realized that that is what they are, which may actually be quite human, if not human at its best. They come to know that much pleasure, happiness, and the like, is merely fiction, and that expectations only add to the fiction. Nevertheless, it is a fiction that is not blindfolded. Maintaining an illusion for what it is may

⁹⁰ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 166.

⁹¹ For further discussion of this issue, see notes 17, 80, 81 above and 116 below.

not be heroic, but at least it is not delusional. Instead of radically doing away with itself, it keeps up appearances, but increasingly as precisely that: a fiction. In *Only a Fiddler* and other novels by Andersen, elements of such fictionalization are in evidence, but the process as a whole is inconsistent and compromised. An author who wants to have his cake and eat it, too, he certainly practices fiction, but chiefly by default. However, parts of his novel design point toward the fairy-tale genre, in which a richer fictional autonomy obtains.

Two passages deserve special attention as bridges between the novel and the fairy tale, and both are associated with Naomi. In the first she is in Rome, with her foster father count and the marquis, her future husband, whose condescension has shaken her more deeply than her encounter in town with the count. Surrounding both her tumultuous inner and her cross-dressed exterior is, however, the Roman night with its special southern light, “this magic soft illumination. But only the eye possesses the image; the soul does not feel the impression, for we do not breathe the air of the south.” Elaborating this difference between the climes of the South and the North, or between “the enjoyment of a sensuous and purely spiritual pleasure,” the passage concludes: “The blue frosty sky in the North lifts itself as a tall, vaulted roof above us, but in the South the remote boundary seems a transparent glass, behind which space still expands.” That said, the epic narrator attaches the note that “this is the air Naomi was breathing,” which once again brings home the point that even sensations that fundamentally impact a character are beyond the capacity of this character to give self-expression.⁹²

But why this discrepancy between the one speaking and the one spoken about? Because discrepancy haunts the latter and disables her self-insight. Tension between her and the men around her was the initial part of the fracture, but her perceptive disability in the wake of this conflict is another part, perhaps aggravated by the former. Her innermost being torn between sensuous inclinations and spiritual obligations, she does not have the mental surplus to put this predicament in context—the North versus the South—in a healing manner. Thus the unifying “we” is needed once again to supply interpretation, if not reparation, in the form of the final lines about liberating transparency, to which Naomi is attracted, on the one hand, but hampered by her psychological makeup, on the other. But most importantly, and unlike some earlier interventions by “us,” in this instance,

⁹² Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 241-2.

while still top-down authoritative and didactic, the “we” is intimately sensitive to the character’s own likely sensations and almost prepared to simply prompt her self-reflection, rather than striving to superimpose “our” reflection upon her. In short, “we” are fairy-tale prone.

Another passage about the traveling Naomi comes even closer to this shorter genre with its more elaborate character autonomy. Here she is not already situated at an exotic destination, but at the beginning of a journey abroad. And while “we” are moving along this time too, “we” are doing so with humor and explicit self-irony, thus stepping down significantly from “our” feigned *Bildungsroman* pedestal to the “democratic” level of the fairy tale, where any decisive move, whether indebted to accidental or more rational causes, is supposed to be merely a self-sustaining part of the imagined world. Epic narrators and other outside forces are only allowed in on the host genre’s terms. And that’s precisely what “we” openly acknowledge as “we” prepare to join Naomi on her upcoming trip:

Now, well. For the sake of originality we will travel along. Some benefit or other we must able to reap, something must be there to meet us! We make the deal that we do not return to Denmark until we have experienced an adventure that reasonably rewards our traveling efforts; if nothing meets us, then we will remain out there, never returning home.⁹³

In Danish the word for “adventure” is “eventyr,” which also means “fairy tale.” Semantically, the journey from one to the other in Andersen’s native language is travel “on location,” which is not insignificant. But even in (English) translation, it should be obvious that the “we/us” speaks in fairy tale mode, tongue visibly in cheek, in this passage.

Yet before we dismiss the statement made by “us” as a harmless joke, we are well advised to note that the prospective tale seems at least a cautionary one. Things can clearly go wrong, and if they do, the consequences will be noticeable. Considering the course of events ahead, at least for Naomi, and the fact that we are still on the premises of an Andersen novel, the quoted passage, for all its premonition of another genre, is also a dire reminder of the importance of reality checks, which, incidentally, Andersen never abolishes in his fairy tales. Characters like Naomi undoubtedly prepare for walking into fairy-tale land as if it were the land of new possibilities; but at least their plural narrator is not unprepared for the opposite: that ahead may await the *end* of possibility.

⁹³ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 196.

Even as a precursor of the fairy-tale narrator, “we” is on target: deprived, perhaps, of the ability to control events and unify fragmented agency within a fairy tale’s realm, but not deprived of the interpretational insight still needed for such a tale’s fictive characters to suffer their setbacks to the advantage of the reader’s understanding, if not their own. I’m speaking of a true Andersen fairy tale, not a harmless flirt with the idea of one. So long as we are in the *Fiddler* and the company of Naomi and her ilk, any intended solution within human affairs, like imaginatively hiding one’s person behind one’s persona, usually only confirms the problem, leading to an impossible life in an impossible world. In this respect, her narrator’s misgivings before the journey was no laughing matter. “We” is willing to toy with the expectation of pleasure, but as for an actual pleasure, and unlike Naomi & Co., “we” is hedging its bets!

The journey from novel to fairy tale thus marks a significant shift in artistic (re)presentation, but no paradigm exchange. The same can be said about the difference between the two basic modes of travel itself. Any travel takes place in space—between places—but also in time. Sometimes one seems to prevail over the other, if not necessarily at the other’s expense, and generally the geography of travel appears a more salient appearance in *Only a Fiddler*. But there are exceptions to this rule, such as a passage from the text Kierkegaard rejected and a whole later fairy tale that reads as if Andersen preemptively returned the favor, and in which travel happens more even-handedly in both time and space/place. What further stresses the compatibility of the novel segment and the fairy tale to come is their shared concern about existential fundamentals—life, happiness, and death—at a crucial turning point.⁹⁴

I earlier took issue with some points Paul Binding made about this novel segment, so it is time to pick up where I left off in that discussion, namely, where the narrating “we” was eagerly recalling how it was then putting the miseries surrounding Christian and his dying mother behind, and was doing so by propelling both Christian and Naomi towards a better future. Supposedly, the miserable fragmentation of their present would be

⁹⁴ Another common denominator is the conception of the poet in the two texts. What Naomi sees as a poet’s only salient feature, the ability to “better recall and apply, better express” what other people “feel and think!” (cf. note 87 above) is almost verbatim what the narrating “we” in “The Galoshes of Fortune” calls the poet’s “better spiritual memory.” (Hans Christian Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” in his *Fairy Tales*, trans. by Marte Hvam Hult, with an introduction and commentaries on the Tales by Jack Zipes and textual annotations by Marte Hvam Hult, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics 2007, p. 253.)

healed by this narrative move forward. As de Mylius, among others, have rightly underscored, “what moves and sets in motion ... and seeks expression in images and shaping fantasy,”—the concept of desire, urge, drift—contains “something archetypical-psychological” as well as “a religious forward moving longing.”⁹⁵ All the more it should concern us, it seems, that as “we” now, in early 1833, “twelve long years” later, in the French capital saturated by divisive politics, and only some twenty-five pages from the end of Andersen’s novel, prepares for the nearing day of reckoning, “we” must admit that the signs of the end result are, if not miserable, at least alarming: “Do you hear the swirling wheel? The years that turn! Years roll ahead, twelve long years!” Hindsight, after finishing *Only a Fiddler*, we, presumably “we” as well, know that even time travel can be a doubtful advantage. The fairy tale “The Galoshes of Fortune” will only reinforce that lesson.⁹⁶

Andersen first published this text in 1838 (in a small volume including two additional tales), about six months after *Only a Fiddler* appeared and some four months before Kierkegaard’s critique of the novel saw publication. The tale’s parrot, which many consider a caricature of Kierkegaard, can thus not be considered a retaliatory measure from Andersen’s side, and it was hardly a preemptive strike either.⁹⁷ Andersen’s sporadic contacts with Kierkegaard before his review came out had led him to believe that a rather positive reaction from the philosopher-theologian was in the works. The parrot effect, then, is rather to be seen as one of several voices articulated by Andersen about a contemporary public figure in the small Danish capital—a man to whose presence he responded from some distance but mostly with civility, and eventually with a degree of empathy. I’ll reserve further comments on their interrelationship to my concluding remarks and now simply credit the parrot in “The Galoshes of Fortune” for the parody and humor it contributes to a story full of serious twists and turns; as such it is a token of the coherent artistic complexity that this short genre in Andersen’s production epitomizes at its best.

I use the phrase “twists and turns” deliberately, for if there were ever

⁹⁵ de Mylius, *Forvandlingens pris*, p. 359.

⁹⁶ See H.C. Andersen, “Lykkens Kalosker,” in Andersen, *Samlede Eventyr og Historier*, Vol. I, Copenhagen: Gyldendals Tranebøger 1962, pp. 98-129; here cited from Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 231-263.

⁹⁷ For an early discussion—between the philosopher Frithiof Brandt and the literary scholar Hans Brix—of the parrot as a possible image of Kierkegaard, see “Dagens Børn,” *Nationaltidende*, January 31, 1930.

a text where accident and other unpredictability win the day, this is it. This is not to say that its composition is loose, but certain narrative elements wittingly pivot on the whimsical.⁹⁸ And travel runs through it all and above all. Moreover, the footwear in the title is not merely a signifier of movement. It—not its wearers—makes the movement happen. But is it a movement for the better? While “The Galoshes of Fortune” seems to signal a positive outcome, it is unclear if fortune is what moves the galoshes in its direction, or if they move themselves and only accidentally hit a happy home run.

The fairly long tale is in six parts and, unlike many Andersen tales, populated mostly by human characters. The exceptions are three birds—one of which is the Kierkegaardian parrot—and two metaphysical creatures. These latter two account for “1. A Beginning” and set an ominously ambiguous stage for the overall course of events. Sorrow is there in person, but her counterpart, Good Fortune, is not; only one of “Good Fortune’s attendant’s chambermaids, who pass around the lesser of Fortune’s gifts,” is present, and among these gifts are “a pair of galoshes that I am going to give human beings.” She continues:

“The galoshes have the characteristic that whoever puts them on is immediately carried to the place and time where he most wants to be. Any wish with respect to time or place is fulfilled at once, and now people will finally find happiness down here!”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Sorrow. “People will be dreadfully unhappy and bless the moment they get rid of these galoshes!”

“How can you say that?” said the other. “I’ll set them here by the door. Someone will mistake them for their own and become the lucky one!” That was their conversation.⁹⁹

Which reader will not feel uneasy about this setup, which smacks of a pact with the Devil? The promise of instant gratification, fulfillment of wishful thinking—all as a fruit of a “mistake” engendered by a Higher Power’s sly deception? The point being that it is all so powerful that its reigning spirit, Good Fortune, does not even have to appear in “person” to carry her scheme through; all she needs is an insignificant underling to act on

⁹⁸ Andersen, in three different letters from 1838, expresses both awareness and some misgivings about the advanced fantasy that his tale advances. It is certainly “not for children”; “it is, I believe, the most satirical [tale] I have written, and some of the [most] fantastic in our literature”; indeed, “I’m now tired of these juggler tricks with fantasy’s golden apples”; see *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, pp. 300, 308, and 302, respectively.

⁹⁹ Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 231-3.

her behalf, because her clients—or her prey, us humans—are all schmucks and ever ready to surrender to temptation. By contrast, Sorrow can be as present in “person” as she wants; her message is skeptical, if not negative, and so it is certain to fall on mostly deaf ears.

Sounds right? Yes—except it would be disappointing to find Andersen invested in such a predictably cautionary tale with the moral bent in neon. And he isn’t. The tale is cautionary, and its scheme of deception will be validated. But its troubling and lasting impact is not its tug-of-war between two one-sided perspectives on life. It’s the irresolution and undecidability of the conflict that wins the day—and the hope for a settlement, one way or the other, that loses. The *Fiddler’s* dilemma between damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t continues to haunt, and yes, you must still do or not do something. No matter whom you favor, Sorrow or Good Fortune, you will be left neither distraught nor relieved by the tale’s outcome, for neither lady is entirely right or entirely wrong; black or white are out, while black and white are in. It is not the dualism of the world Andersen’s story challenges, but the moral coding of the opposite poles, and the notion that a simple choice between them, let alone a harmonious reconciliation or an equilibrium, is possible. Soothing outcomes simply do not stand up to textual scrutiny, so perhaps both Sorrow and Good Fortune are codes that need decoding. Could, say, happiness not be code for the accidental, even if labeled as fate? It seems, even more so in this tale than in the *Fiddler*, that happiness is not for real in Andersen’s work; what is for real is the expectation of it. But does that alone, and the awareness of it, on the other hand, suffice to make life worth living, regardless of Good Fortune’s lures and Sorrow’s objections? To test these propositions, let’s follow the life journeys “The Galoshes of Fortune” instigates.

The first takes place in part “2. What happened to the Councilman”¹⁰⁰ as this character, “absorbed in the time of King Hans” mistakenly puts on “Good Fortune’s galoshes instead of his own” and finds that “the power of the galoshes’ magic had taken him back to the time of King Hans.” To make the long story of this time travel short, the good burgher is shocked to find his familiar hometown replaced with its primitive and filthy antecedent. Funny confusions abound in his exchanges with fellow citizens of this older world, but while they may heighten the spirit of the reader, the councilman himself fails to appreciate the fun and only finds peace of mind when, “luckily for him, the galoshes slipped off, and with them all the magic.” But as predicted

¹⁰⁰ Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 233-9.

before, the relief that issues from his homecoming to the modern world he knew before magic sent him out to visit what he had admired from a safe scholarly distance to the past, is, also, unsettling: “He thought about the fear and distress he had overcome and praised with all his heart the reality of our own time with all its defects, still so much better than where he had just been. And that was sensible of the councilman, of course.”

The last line, its phrasing in particular, gives away an ironic distance on the part of the narrative to the smug pronouncements that clearly are meant to sum up the character’s own thoughts. If his flirt with the past initially was gratuitous and deserving of the reality check the galoshes have facilitated for him, his response to that check is doubly revealing. It shows that his studies of the past were superficial but also that by rushing back to the familiar for comfort, rather than using the corrective he has become privy to as an incentive to solidify and deepen his contact with the unfamiliar, he is a character unsusceptible to either education or maturation; quite a dire confirmation of a councilman’s bourgeois identity.

So, instead of enabling his travel out of his comfort zone, and a subsequent betterment of him as a person, the magic’s impact on this man has only confirmed his social persona, thereby removing any hope that might have existed beforehand that he might be worth a better fate. While our time traveler takes the return from his outing to the past, in which he once believed himself to have been genuinely “absorbed,” as reassuring, it is anything but. It may have taken him from the ashes—but only into the fire. His self-containment and lack of imagination may have lain dormant until they were challenged, but now they are for everyone to see. That he above all doesn’t see them only adds harm to his self-injury.

Next in line for a trip in the galoshes of fortune is the watchman in “3. The Watchman’s Adventure.”¹⁰¹ His is not time travel, nor is it a major geographical journey. He merely wishes he were a lieutenant living in the neighborhood, and once “the galoshes worked their magic[,] [t]he watchman passed into the lieutenant’s person and thoughts.” In that new identity he reads a poem the lieutenant has written about his envy of the poor but happy watchman, and as a consequence the watchman wants to be himself again and is indeed returned to his former self with wife and kids and happiness. Still wearing the galoshes, though, he watches a falling star and cannot help wishing he could travel into the cosmos. That too is granted him, and he ends up on the moon, where the residents doubt the

¹⁰¹ Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 239-44.

Earth is inhabited. Meanwhile, as his spirit is in this other world, his body, left like a corpse on the street when the dream took him away, is taken to the hospital, which leaves its migrant soul with the problem of how to find its remains when it returns to Earth. “But we can take comfort that the soul is most clever when it’s on its own. The body only dumbs it down.” So, as soon as the hospital staff removed the galoshes, “the soul had to get back right away. It made a beeline for the body, and suddenly the man was alive again. ... He was released the same day, but the galoshes remained at the hospital.”

And the takeaway from this man’s small trip to the lieutenant’s room and long one to the moon? Mostly harmless entertainment, it seems; no harm done, but no existential gains obtained either. A zero-sum game, where dreamy inclinations are not rewarded as expected, but the return to reality is no antidote to continued fruitless dreaming, either.

Far more consequential seems “4. A Heady Moment. A Recital. A Most Unusual Trip.”¹⁰² It is a witty segment, featuring, among other things, a new poem, but also a theater performance where “between the recital numbers [the] new poem was recited.” Its title is “Grandma’s Glasses,” and a hospital intern in the audience likes the poem and wishes for its glasses: “Maybe if they were used correctly, you could look right into people’s hearts. That was really more interesting, he thought, than to find out what would happen next year. After all you’ll find that out, but never the other.” He goes on to imagine the insides of different hearts in the audience, one a dress shop, another one an empty shop, and one that is the best of them all but unfortunately has a clerk already. Others “would call out, ‘Please come in.’ Oh, I wish I could go in, like a lovely little thought right into their hearts.” And so he could and did, thanks to the galoshes, from heart to heart: a church, a butcher shop, a rich man’s wife—but “it was an old, run-down pigeon coop. The husband’s picture was the weather vane”—and even “a room of mirrors like the one in Rosenborg Castle” where “in the middle of the floor sat, like the Dalai Lama, the person’s insignificant self, amazed to see its own greatness.” It soon becomes all too much, and our hospital intern “wasn’t able to gather his thoughts, and thought his overactive imagination had run away with him.” After some further ins and outs he ends with “a bloody back, and that’s all he got from Good Fortune’s Galoshes.”

Clearly the sum total of this sequence of travel experiences—all from

¹⁰² Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 244-51.

purely mental traveling—does not add up to the good fortune promised at the outset. The journey rather gets increasingly complicated, particularized, and short of perspective. The driving lure to gaze into the secrets of the human heart, a mixed blessing to which the poet in Andersen himself actually confessed to be beholden—comes at great cost. Even if it were a window on the truth of humanity, the insights yielded either remain hard to comprehend or reveal unpleasant truths about appearances being deceiving one way or the other, whether belying the richness or poverty of the heart and soul behind the human facade. The bloody back that marks the observer at the end appears to signify the chaos resulting from his hopeful search for a meaningful truth.

And there is more of the same. In “5. The Clerk’s Transformation”¹⁰³ we return to the watchman who brought the galoshes to the hospital in the first place. When no one picks them up, they are turned into the police, where it is now a clerk’s turn to confuse them with his own. Walking in them on the street he meets a poet whose gifts and station in life he envies and dreams of exchanging with his own. The sensation of flowers breathing and sleeping in light and air captivates his newly acquired poetic spirit—until he realizes a catch. “I’m sleeping and dreaming! But it’s remarkable anyway, that you can dream so naturally and still know it’s a dream.” And further: “All the wisdom and magnificence you hear and see in dreams is like the gold of the mound people. When you get it, it’s splendid and glorious, but seen in the light of day, it’s just rocks and shriveled leaves, alas.” Suddenly, the light comes across as a double-edged sword, and so does the poetry it enlightens. Yes, the poet dreams—with awareness. Yes, poetic dreams bring splendor and glory—but as expectations of pleasure only. Pleasure itself vanishes like dew before the sun.

Differently put, poetic dreams are adjacent to daydreams, which may sound like a win-win scenario. Now you are a poet, next minute you are a little bird, as if you were enjoying a flexible, dual identity. But the perception of having it both ways is delusional. Poetic dreams always come at a cost and have a downside as well as an upside—with the latter being a slippery slope to the former. An example would be to encounter a group of upper-class kids with low morality, because a true poetic attitude is as obligated to encompass both sides of this schism as it would be entitled to relish the free association between poetic life and the life of a bird.

And birds, too, come with different identities that are not easily

¹⁰³ Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 251-7.

negotiated: lark, canary, and then Poppy-boy, the Kierkegaardian parrot, whose refrain—“Come, let’s now be human!”—does sound in tune with his alleged alter ego’s criticism of Andersen (whose voice, in turn, is delivered by the canary) for being a whining and fake poetic genius without moderation or backbone, and for lacking Poppy’s—and Kierkegaard’s—gift for the human in the sense of the comical and laughter signifying “the highest spiritual stage.” Finally, the canary turns to the lark—impersonating the clerk—to offer it its message of an alternative spirituality: “‘You little grey Danish bird,’ said the canary. ‘You have also been captured. It must be cold in your forests, but at least there is freedom there. Fly away! They have forgotten to close the cage, and the upper window is open. Fly, fly!’” The parrot, meanwhile, desperately continues his refrain, and the lark, right after returning to its desk and former human identity, cannot help parroting the parrot. Until the good clerk finally collects himself and says: “‘That was really a troubling dream I had. The whole thing was a lot of stupid nonsense.’”

Once again a character’s journey outside his comfort zone—this time as far out as into poetry, the very institution for expanding, deepening, enriching a human being’s station in life with experience, awareness, and ultimate truth—has failed. Even worse, the path to creativity turned on itself and resulted in the direct opposite: “stupid nonsense.” Sorrow’s misgivings about the gift from Good Fortune seem entirely validated. With one caveat: precisely the awareness factor in poetry that could have prevented the disaster the clerk experienced was the thing he persistently kept at bay, not the galoshes that took him away from awareness. While his story may have validated Sorrow’s prediction of a dreadful unhappiness following the galoshes, and her expectation that abandoning them would bring relief, the successful operation did not preclude the patient’s death. Sound logic is no more an obstacle to the galoshes going than the law of gravity is to the honeybee flying.

While neither Sorrow nor Good Fortune has hit the jackpot thus far, significant insights are reached in the tale’s last segment, “6. The Best Thing the Galoshes Brought,”¹⁰⁴ both in terms of reflecting Andersen’s own notions of travel abroad and in terms of the text’s coming full circle by taking us back to the authorial notion of travel in all its complexity. A student preparing for the ministry puts on the galoshes and walks down a little garden path in central Copenhagen, exclaiming almost in Andersen’s personal lingo and

¹⁰⁴ Andersen, “The Galoshes of Fortune,” pp. 258-61.

tone: “Oh, travel, travel! ... That’s the most splendid thing in the world. That’s my heart’s fondest desire and would quiet this restlessness I feel. But it has to be far away! I want to see the wonders of Switzerland, travel in Italy, and— ” Yet lo and behold, the actual experience on the road in Switzerland proves less dreamy and more stressful. Yes, “all of nature was grand, severe and dark,” and so forth, but “then it started to snow, and the cold wind blew.” Predictably, a change of mind ensues: “‘Oh,’ he sighed. ‘I wish we were on the other side of the Alps, then it would be summer, and I would have gotten money on my letter of credit. I can’t enjoy Switzerland because of the anxiety I have about this. Oh I wish I were on the other side.’” As the saying goes, the grass is always greener on the other side.

Or is it really? For in “Lovely Italy’ ... thousands of poisonous flies and mosquitos flew into the coach,” and surrounded by the unparalleled natural beauty they were promised by the travel books, and which they agree is indeed there, the travelers’ “stomachs were empty” and their general misery multiplying. In the midst of the most desirable place imaginable there is no place to go: “With all their hearts they yearned for a place to spend the night, but where would this be?” Eventually the misery that seems to know no end ends in “perpetual whimpering: *miserabili, Eccellenza!*” Expectations of delight have definitively not led to delight itself. But our theology student seems to have a diagnosis of the problem:

“Yes, traveling is very well,” sighed the student, “if one just didn’t have a body! If only the body could rest and the spirit could travel. Wherever I am, there are miseries that press on my heart. I want something better than the present. Yes, something better, the best. But where and what is it? After all, I do know what I want, to go to a happy place, the happiest place of all!”

Not only is this diagnosis no solution to the problem; it is the major part of it! After looking for a real answer to his own question, he simply gives up and settles for a platitude. Yet in this way his case epitomizes the conundrum that has reigned during the entire tale ever since it was set in motion by the confrontation between Sorrow and Good Fortune’s proxy.

The pursuit of happiness, the ultimate happiness at that, is indeed the irresistible urge that drives all travel (as a metaphor for all human endeavor), but it is also what drives all actual traveling into a hole. Had the traveler been pure spirit, it might have been otherwise, for spirit can dwell satisfied in a perpetual expectation of happiness, which is what models of spiritual travelogues traditionally have sought to materialize aesthetically. Meanwhile,

the body, that burdensome other part of the human, has basic needs of food and sleep and physical comfort, the absence of which no spiritual satisfaction can atone for in the long run. Absent any magic squaring the circle of human dualism, only death, in parting the body from the soul, can clear the hurdle, which it does.

After the student has delivered his cited words, he is back in his home, in a black coffin in the middle of the floor. “He lay there in the quiet sleep of death. His wish was granted—his body rested, his spirit traveled”—all in affirmation of Solon’s words of wisdom: “Call him till he dies, not happy but fortunate,” which actually, as a preamble to the tale’s own conclusion, does square the circle by talking about happiness and fortune in one breath, yet out of opposite sides of the mouth. Following this preamble, Andersen’s resolution is ingenious, as it sees the forest for the trees by advocating the solution that solutions be taken out of the equation once and for all.

The scene is somber. “Every corpse is the Sphinx of Immortality,” and so death cannot tell what the student wrote in poetic form “only two days earlier.” But the narrative is not bound by the silence of a sphinx, and the reader can infer from the two stanzas it affords that, for all the unspeakable solitude of death, human lives can be as silent and about as much suffering as any corpse, of which death may not be aware. “Know that in life much presses harder on the heart / Than all the soil that’s cast upon your coffin.” Leaning over the dead student’s coffin are both Sorrow and Good Fortune’s messenger. Between their opening exchange in section 1 and now, an empirical record has been established, so now the question of who has been proven right and wrong can be addressed. Sorrow reads the evidence in favor of her view: the galoshes did no one any good, to the contrary. But Good Fortune’s messenger is as slippery as always and even seeks to escape the dilemma—that the characters willingly wore the galoshes despite the falseness of their promise—between the horns.

“At least they brought the man who’s resting here a lasting good!” answered Good Fortune’s messenger.” Already her phrasing is seductive. “At least” may suggest a concession on her part, but rather than leaving it there, she covers her tracks with an even grander deception; not only was the student not deprived of any good, he was brought a *lasting* good. Rather than trying to dispute the facts, which would be suicidal, Good Fortune’s messenger cunningly leapfrogs above the empirical to a grander scheme of things that has the added benefit of not inviting any tangible scrutiny. She even seems to be taking her deceptive clue from the student’s disarmingly

naive playbook, which spoke in favor of the spiritual—to which the lasting, if not eternal, belongs—as opposed to the bodily mundane, which he himself wanted to see discounted. Yet Sorrow avoids her opponent’s trap by seeing through her rhetorical varnish under which nothing of substance resides. “‘Oh no,’ said Sorrow. ‘He went away on his own; he was not called. His spiritual power here was not strong enough to gain the treasures that he was destined for. I will do him a favor.’”

What this exchange reveals is a fundamental ambiguity in Danish Golden Age thinking around Andersen (and Kierkegaard, as well as the controversy between them). Is the body/spirit dualism an optimistic, Hegelian-like ladder onto which the individual is called by the spirit that reigns supreme and omniscient and onto which he therefore can step, reasonably assured that his own share of spirit will self-perpetuate to no end, or rather until the ideal, “the happiest place,” has been arrived at? Or is our traveler, in body or spirit, or as a person composed of both, not undergirded by such a safety net of transpersonal progression, rather a traveler in life all “on his own” and thus entirely reliant on his own “spiritual power,” which in the student’s case—and in the case of many fellow travelers before him in this fairy tale—verifiably did not stand up to the challenges before it—especially not to the challenge presented by the temptation to embark on that other travel mode, Good Fortune’s, and by wearing its galoshes?

It seems obvious that Andersen sides with this latter, more modern and individualistic model and even courageously populates it with an individual that both falls between tradition and modernity and displays some of the weakness Kierkegaard detected in Andersen himself. However, the final lines of “The Galoshes of Fortune” show anything but authorial weakness. While Good Fortune’s spokeswoman with her highbrow doublespeak hits Sorrow below the belt, the latter proves to be the one with the upper hand. Literally speaking, since she physically removes the student’s galoshes and strips him of the illusion he fell for and was unable to free himself of. Not only does that bring him back to life, as it was before his ill-advised chase of pie in the sky; one more thing happens: “Sorrow disappeared, but also the galoshes. She must have considered them her property.” Good Fortune has both lost her prerogative and lost it to her arch opponent.

This is the ultimate ambiguity embraced on Andersen’s entire journey through the human condition. A spiritual dualism in crisis is his focal point, and at no point does he evade its premises. But amongst its two conflicting versions he prioritizes one over the other. One outlook, idealistic and

highfalutin, that ends up discredited by human experience, even discredits herself by backing her claim to spiritual power with lowly machinations. The other outlook, tempered and perceptive, skeptical, yet morally authentic and sensitive to real life individuals' trials and tribulations, seems to have the author's stamp of approval and so the ideological contest is decided in her favor. But even as she takes possession of the galoshes as of a trophy, victory rings pyrrhic.

For one thing, her own modern game plan requires individual actors of some capacity, a requirement that has clearly not been met by the tale's cast. Making the removal of the adversary's lure appear a strategic feat, and not simply an act of tactically thumbing her nose at Good Fortune, may also backfire as the real power of this adversary always lay in the weakness of the victims, which doesn't go away by removing an externality. And, again, little suggests that wishful human thinking is not still on the go and will remain so regardless of any symbol's deconstruction. Finally, might it not inadvertently compromise Sorrow's integrity to take possession of the symbol that most blatantly refutes all that she stands for?

Or are the last lines of "The Galoshes of Fortune" to be read as a sign that both Sorrow and Good Fortune (the latter personified by the galoshes) are now gone—and with them the very dichotomy governing both sides of this culture war, as it were? If the answer is in the affirmative, one wonders what will surface in their stead. But even if Andersen has not left us all at this ground zero, he has certainly destabilized and unsettled existing dichotomies, one perhaps more than another. None has been untouched by his critique; not his reader, either.

All things considered, traveling with Andersen is no easy ride; it takes us not to the end of the world, but somewhat to the end of how we knew it. As the saying goes, it familiarizes the unfamiliar and defamiliarizes the familiar. The one wholesome thing about this is that both happen in the same artistic gesture. How far the disruption of received knowledge and assessment might go may still be debatable. Does, for instance, the magic inherent in the galoshes (and in other typical fairy-tale designs) leave the scene with them? Was it always a force for liberating spirit from body and for enabling its journey on its own into the unknown, unimpeded by bodily deadweight? Was the outright death of the body an acceptable price for the spirit's independence? Do intangible spiritual ends justify the sacrifice of bodily materiality as a means to that high end? Or is, by contrast, magic's ideological code not restricted to masking a simple mental seduction? Does

it also put a positive spin on the accidental, a chaos far more frightening than lowly personal weaknesses? Can even fate, good fate at that, be just an orderly term for the accidental? The answers are still blowing in the wind, but the questions are hard to avoid after reading seminal Andersen texts. Yet Kierkegaard didn't seem to notice.

VIII. *A Comedy in the Open Air—an Open-Ended Closure?*

Most treatments of Hans Christian Andersen that seek to propose a comprehensive view of their subject would prioritize his famous fairy tales and stories. This essay is different in taking off from writings that connect Andersen and Kierkegaard to one another, which in the case of Andersen's contribution to the nexus between them puts the emphasis on his third novel and on aspects of his Kierkegaard-related works in other genres that are also informed by or related to their intertextuality. The overall Andersen remains my ever-so-sketchy, objective, but I meet it with observations radiating primarily, though not exclusively, from the material within which he or Kierkegaard directly or indirectly refers to the other, even if I submit an interpretation of these texts that goes beyond what the parties themselves might have intended or envisioned. In the case of Andersen, my focus here, the Kierkegaard connection is but a sounding board, no more, no less, that was in place when Andersen penned his works, and of which I avail myself beyond Kierkegaardian earshot, as the discussions of *Only a Fiddler* and "The Galoshes of Fortune" will have demonstrated already.

The remaining work of art in which Andersen evokes Kierkegaard is the vaudeville *Comedy in the Open Air*, published in 1840 and first performed in the month of May that year.¹⁰⁵

Theater was always Andersen's unfortunate love; few of his many attempts in this genre were truly successful and hardly any has stood the test of time.¹⁰⁶ Despite this fact many of his works even in other genres include references to stage activities—playwrights, performances, audiences, the list is long.

In *Only a Fiddler*, for instance, one chapter begins with Christian

¹⁰⁵ H.C. Andersen, *En Comedie i det Gronne*. Cited here (in my translation) from *H.C. Andersens Samlede Skrifter*, Vol. 10, 2nd edition, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1878, pp. 399-428.

¹⁰⁶ *Comedy in the Open Air* was actually an exception in terms of its immediate success, but not in terms of its lasting importance, which it owes solely to the parody of Kierkegaard; see *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 405.

being taken by his mentor Peter Wik to attend the performance of both a comedy and a ballet, an experience that occasions reflections on precisely a dichotomy of the kind that runs through the whole novel (and through tales like “The Galoshes of Fortune” as well).¹⁰⁷ On the one hand we have the theater as the place where dreams, such as Christian’s of happiness, are invoked, while on the other, there are theaters, like the ballet, where the opposite is the case as performers here show the shadowy side of human life. In addition, Christian’s evening in the audience with Wik also shows him both looking in vain for Naomi among the spectators and sensing for the first time how art, including his own music, holds the promise of something deeper, even “higher, nobler, than everyday human business,” which, however, he personally must toil artistically in order to bring to the fore. Added to that reflection on *Only a Fiddler*’s most conflicted theme is a sign of the very schism between Christian and Naomi’s version of humanity. As she is really at a theater, in Paris, especially a ballet gets under her skin and shakes her visibly; after her dizziness subsides, she smiles and describes her reaction: “there is so much fantasy in the demonic Sabbath that one can’t contain it. It seems an entire feverish dream.”¹⁰⁸ Clearly, the demonic attracts her as much as it scares Christian—and we become privy to yet another telling eruption from the fault line running through this novel’s underground.

In “The Galoshes of Fortune,” as we recall, the poem about “Grandma’s Glasses” was recited at a theater. It was here the intern in the audience found inspiration to express his hidden desire for glasses that, like grandma’s, would enable him to “look right into people’s hearts,” the mixed blessing granted Andersen himself by this double-edged sword in his artistic armor.

Though less profound, the theatrical implications of the 1840 vaudeville resonate with the ones just mentioned, and besides, the play shares in the travel theme that occupies so much of Andersen’s work in that the theater in question is a small traveling enterprise that moves not only its show from one site to another, but within the show its focus from one caricatured character to another (all played by the same actor in different disguises). As one of these figures is a satirical take on the Kierkegaard who had trounced Andersen and his *Fiddler* (both the novel and its male protagonist) for spinelessness, it lies near at hand to note the play’s (and Andersen’s general) show of mobility as a merry reminder that a flexible spine has an emotional

¹⁰⁷ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, pp. 100-2.

¹⁰⁸ Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 253.

upside—a gift for sympathetic insight—that is as important as the downside the studiously cerebral Kierkegaard had given all his attention.

Comedy in the Open Air has two actors only. Frank is the inspector for a count, into whose park and pavilion Dalby, the director of a traveling provincial theater, wants to be permitted, along with his troupe, to give a performance. Because of Frank's resistance on his master's behalf to this plan, Dalby needs to take some persuasive measures, which he does by having all his comedy's characters act their role in front of Frank, until he eventually relents to the talent of their performance. The straw that breaks the back of his opposition lands when Dalby charmingly reveals to him that all the characters were enacted by him wearing different wigs. What makes this display of talent, as Frank calls it, or poetry, which is Dalby's own name for it, so compelling is clearly its meta-theatrical effects: actors being enacted, and a whole play being part of a play about itself. The comedy lies not merely in the original play for which performance location is being sought, or in its various humorous character roles; it lies as much in the comic illusion of the second order embracing the first, and in the elusiveness with which that second order embedding the first invites the audience to enjoy the beans being spilled about the whole trick.

Without exaggerating the artistic power invested in Andersen's scheme, its light-hearted aesthetic masquerade is of the kind a philosophical mind like Kierkegaard's might at least be expected to take for what it is. This did not happen, however, in no small measure because one of the caricatured characters is—Kierkegaard. The still-living writer of the paper on Andersen's third novel is quite mercilessly nailed to the cross, and not the cross of his radical Christian faith but the one of the Hegelianism he had abandoned, if more in substance than in style. Whatever caused Kierkegaard to pen his critique of *Only a Fiddler* in offensively snarled lingo, Andersen parodies the effect with a vengeance by putting similar words in the mouth of his vaudeville haircutter, “or perhaps *hairsplitter*, who reads out Kierkegaard's own mock-Hegelian prose as if he were nattering gobbledygook.”¹⁰⁹

In fairness, though, to Andersen and the play as a whole, several non-Kierkegaardian figures have been successively included, too; for instance, a decoration painter, a poet, a prompter, even the coquettish wife of the

¹⁰⁹ Timothy Stock, “Kierkegaard's Theatrical Aesthetic from Repetition to Imitation,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Chichester UK: Wiley/Blackwell 2015, p. 368. See also note 17 above for Julia Watkin's comments on Kierkegaard's *From the Papers of One Still Living*.

painter, with each appearance followed by a scene in which inspector Frank delivers his response to what he has just watched. As this list of characters more than suggests, everything in the play is about playing—including such parodies as the painter’s critique of nature’s imperfection and poverty, despite all its richness; the poet’s preference of rhyming over poesy; the problems caused by a stuttering prompter; words about annoying audiences deserving to be critiqued as much as the actors on stage. At the end director Dalby repays inspector Frank’s compliment for his multi-character performance by dispelling whatever Frank might have kept of illusions about a safe distance between play and audience. Whatever the prompter repeats, following Dalby’s instruction, was “only a mirror image of [Frank’s] own thoughts.” Speaking directly to the count’s inspector, the instructor continues: “The count has told me that you wouldn’t even be attending one of my shows; [yet] you have yourself played a role in its first performance.” And to answer how an (imaginary!) audience reacted, we are treated to a poem that reads, in part: “The play itself has actually no action,/ It was only an arabesque you witnessed,/Some characters appeared in it,/ The play must be a frame around them.”¹¹⁰

This parodic specimen of Andersen’s literary art ends on a light note doing what one of the author’s novels and one of his fairy tales have been shown to be doing in earnest—earnest humor and irony not excluded—all along: striving to make sensations of life’s reality and action step into verbal character. This way even decisively conflicted and multifarious impulses reveal a pattern that is susceptible to a verifiable attribution of meaning. The reading conducting the process may be arabesque-like, but at least it makes accessible the meaning that was previously concealed for lack of an interpretational frame—or that was demonstrably inaccessible, as when happiness evades any approach but that of an expectation.

Kierkegaard’s critique of Andersen may have been indirectly helpful to this endeavor. In deeming his work artistically impossible, Kierkegaard inadvertently contributed to marking the conditions of possibility under which Andersen labored. Kierkegaard’s concept of literary art may have suggested what Andersen had to transgress to find his authentic voice as an artist. The wall that he erected around Andersen’s art was one Andersen neither could nor would climb on his way to himself. But as a wall to play up against, its forbidding presence may actually have enforced the kind of self-assurance he needed, which was very different from Kierkegaard’s.

¹¹⁰ H.C. *Andersens Samlede Skrifter*, p. 428.

Several indicators point in this direction. In spite of the immediate shock it caused him, Andersen handled Kierkegaard's critique of the *Fiddler* "professionally," and only later "did [he] take revenge with the satire" in *Comedy in the Open Air*, according to Torben Brostrøm.¹¹¹ Andersen's comments in his 1855 autobiography certainly lend credence to that assessment. Rather than rehearsing old grudges, he lightheartedly tries to paraphrase what he at the time (1838) had believed to be the gist of Kierkegaard's charges against him: "that I was no writer but a fictitious character in a work in which he would create a supplement to me!" Clearly written with a twinkle, the statement comes from someone who has managed to move on in his life and does not bitterly look back, an impression enforced by the next sentence: "Later I better understood this author, who has obliged me along my way with kindness and discernment."¹¹² Even if Andersen here puts a more diplomatic face on the affair and his whole relation to Kierkegaard than he might have done in a confession booth, his commitment to civility seems genuine enough to suggest that on the course he followed in his artistic life he did not feel invaded, let alone threatened by Kierkegaard. These were not birds of a feather having to fly together.

Less conciliatory but no less attentive to Kierkegaard's fate are remarks in two letters Andersen wrote in 1855 about Kierkegaard's illness and subsequent death. Both give factual and observational accounts, and especially the one about the philosopher's slightly scandalous funeral expresses genuine bafflement on the letter writer's part and some distress as well on behalf of the deceased.¹¹³ This seems yet another indication that Kierkegaard remained of some importance to Andersen; not as someone close to him, but not as someone Andersen felt was a stone in his shoe either. Later, in his diaries, Andersen sporadically sounds a moderately critical note about something Kierkegaard-related. His strongest reaction is from 1862, when, after reading *The Concept of Anxiety*, he conveys to Jonas Collin a strong disagreement with the author about his claim that God in Heaven doesn't understand the genius. How unchristian a statement! More tempered is a note from a dinner party given in 1864 by the composer

¹¹¹ Torben Brostrøm, "Kritikerfejder og rollespil."

¹¹² The quotes from Andersen's *Mit Livs Eventyr* are quoted here from *Encounters with Kierkegaard. A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, collected, ed. and annotated by Bruce H. Kirmmse, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse and Virginia R. Laursen, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 28; see also note 12 above and KW, I, pp. 75-6.

¹¹³ See *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, pp. 118 and 136.

Hartmann, where the host had lumped Kierkegaard and Wagner together as equally destructive and non-contributing; Andersen simply records what was said.¹¹⁴

It would be a stretch to claim that Kierkegaard responded in kind to Andersen's relative generosity. For instance, his lengthy reaction to *Comedy in the Open Air* and its haircutting parody was "very witty, but also embittered," in the words of the scholar Hilding Ringblom, who has perused the document, which for various reasons was not brought to the public's attention during Kierkegaard's lifetime (but might well have circulated in manuscript copies among some individuals interested in the matter).¹¹⁵ Still, it would be overreaching to deem Kierkegaard unequivocally hostile to Andersen. As Ringblom also points out, he definitely showed a positive interest in Andersen's fairy tale, "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," which had been published less than a month after the appearance of *From the Papers of One Still Living*, and which he asked the young son of an acquaintance to read aloud during several visits to the boy's home a couple of years later.

Ringblom is right in noting that Kierkegaard's preference for precisely this tale was no coincidence. Opposite the wimpy fiddler, the tin soldier is both steadfast and righteous. Born, or molded, with but one leg, he compensates for his handicap by standing more upright than any normal soldier and does so even during a downward spiraling journey of life, through the gutter, inside the gut of a fish rushing downstream past a big rat, etc. Even when haphazardly thrown into the oven by a playing kid, he burns in an upright position, standing guard, gun in hand, only to have his straightforward misery crowned by ultimate disaster as the paper ballerina, his one human desire whom he unhappily loved from a distance, "accidentally" burns up beside him. A good outcome for a real man by Kierkegaard's norm? One wonders.

To be sure, the unhappily loving soldier's remains form a tin heart, but as romantic as this emblem may seem, it perpetuates the already unsettling truth that he always was and will remain emotionally cold and metallic. Human expectations once again become the only reality as the real objects

¹¹⁴ For these two diary entries, see *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1861-1863*, Vol. V, ed. by Tue Gad and Kirsten Weber, Copenhagen: DSL/Gad 1971, p. 256; and *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1864-1865*, Vol. VI, ed. by Kirsten Weber, Copenhagen: DSL/Gad 1972, p. 164.

¹¹⁵ Hilding Ringblom, "Søren Kierkegaards besynderlige interesse for H.C. Andersens tredje roman *Kun en Spillemand*. Var der tale om et udfald fra det forhenværende vidunderbarn Søren mod det forhenværende vidunderbarn Hans Christian?," in *Anderseniana*, 2012, pp. 83-4.

of their desire evade them. This soldier might have stood up to an inborn adversity, yet the extreme he tried to counter drove him to fall for the temptation not only to compensate but to overcompensate for his missing part. He would have been damned, had he not stood up to his challenge; now he is damned for the way he stood. For this outcome to be tragic, however, there would need to be values involved that deserved better, as in the likeminded cases from Andersen's hand we have reviewed. Were there? Wasn't the soldier rather an in-between figure, caught between valid opposites and defined only by the impossibility of his station? Steadfastness, like all else of singular importance in Andersen's universe, reigns supreme at its peril. Reversing it merely turns it from a nuisance into a far worse shadow. The human condition, as Andersen sees it, is irrevocably and irreducibly ambiguous. Could that have been even Kierkegaard's tacit takeaway as he listened to the little boy reading the tale aloud to him?

The question touches not so much on the relation between Andersen and Kierkegaard *per se* as upon its possible bearing on an assessment of Andersen's life and work from a larger perspective. A fair summation suggests that it was neutrality, not war, or even cold war, that obtained between them. To Kierkegaard it remained an armed neutrality, while to Andersen it was disarmed—if not disarming. Kierkegaard often felt he had an ax to grind with Andersen, Andersen less so the other way. For all his admitted uncertainties, his artistic direction grew increasingly steady and unaffected by Kierkegaard's stance. Polite distance became an adequate expression of one's marginal relevance to the other, and of one's role as a contrasting but illuminating backdrop to the other. Andersen was indeed an-other of Kierkegaard's—as he was an-other of many others and much other. This composite otherness was key to his selfhood.

Like the typical journey of an Andersen protagonist, the tin soldier's is driven by fate only in the sense of one accident piling upon another. Still, the pattern these coincidences leave behind resembles destiny as it clues the ambiguousness of existence in a way that conforms to the accidental, yet lends itself to interpretation.¹¹⁶ Softening his responses to hostile impulses,

¹¹⁶ It must be reemphasized that while Andersen can indeed be considered Kierkegaard's other, the authors' positions are more interconnected than Kierkegaard's critique of Andersen suggests. Especially if viewed as a meme from today's point of view, their respective notions of *the accidental*, say, bear a significant resemblance. In a recent Kierkegaard-related article, "Literature and (Anti-)Humanism," my opening section about "Kierkegaard's Existential Story in a World of Intertextuality" refers to a contemporary Danish author's discussion of both writers as "existential storytellers," who both *tell the*

coming from Kierkegaard or any other worthwhile source, is Andersen's bold but necessary means to the end of artistically embracing humanity's perilously chaotic ways, including his own. Again and again he allows the world a graphic view of his own inner chaos.

One among countless examples comes from an 1838 letter to a woman friend in which he revels in the praise he has received from the Swedish author Fredrika Bremer for *Only a Fiddler*. Yet he cannot believe in such a godly tailwind. For if God was doing him this much good, "then I'm ungrateful to Him, not good and innocent enough!" Self-deprecatingly he continues: "You don't realize the struggle that unfolds in my soul, often I doubt all my powers, feel to have done nothing or not being able to do anything, at other times I see my name among the living ones; oh, this matter must be self-disappointment, as my heart's best feeling has always been."¹¹⁷

An integrated soul continued to elude Andersen, yet his process of defying the impossibility of integrating his fragmented spirit never ceased.¹¹⁸

world, unlike realists who *tell about the world* (*A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Chichester UK: Wiley/Blackwell 2015, p. 317). Later in the same volume Stephen Backhouse writes about "Politics, Society, and Theology in Golden Age Denmark" and directly about Kierkegaard's critique of logical world history: "Anthropologically, the deterministic 'world historical' point of view simply does not describe the state of human existence." More specifically, he cites Kierkegaard saying: "Actuality is not served thereby, for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic," leading to the conclusion on Kierkegaard's part, now in Backhouse's words, "that contingency and freedom are intrinsic features of historical, social life." (*A Companion to Kierkegaard*, p. 392). This is not far from Andersen's perception of the accidental; his difference and otherness shows as he *tells* this world as *it* shapes, or *deforms*, human existence (be it for a defiant Naomi or a compliant Christian), whereas Kierkegaard's single (ethical) individual *chooses* the same world and in so doing *forms* existence. See also textual passages referenced in notes 17, 80, 81 above.

¹¹⁷ *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 311

¹¹⁸ On some occasions Andersen in his letters refers univocally to an appreciation of a work like *Only a Fiddler*, e.g., *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, pp. 282, 289, 326, and 352. But in most cases, acts of praise are received with tellingly mixed feelings on Andersen's part. Exhilarated about his love of Denmark from the perspective of a recent sojourn in Italy, he suddenly makes a turnabout and says: "I'm doomed to write for a small country, and how many acknowledge me" (pp. 257-8); and while "most of what I have written is a reflection of myself," the reason *Only a Fiddler* has become, according to many, "my best novel," is that for the first time "I let the Lord handle it all"—as the Bible has it, "the entire work is spirited by God" and comes to the author as the memory of an old tale that has to be retold (p. 275); there are even times when Andersen combines these pairs of contrasts, as when in 1837 he tells one of his female friends that despite their praise for his work, Danes, unlike foreigners, do not "appreciate the God that speaks through

Sometimes it amounted to negotiating a basic relation between contradictory sentiments, as when he claimed in *Only a Fiddler* to have written “likely the most brilliant scene of nature, which no poet so far has touched” and yet had to subdue an inclination to call the entire novel “Grey in Grey”;¹¹⁹ at other times the effort went further, as he describes it to the same recipient in 1838: “The event of my life is poesy in itself, it will always be of the same interest as my best works, yet it does not belong to me. ... I was born a poet, I feel, and I am conscious of everything stepping into my life, as poetry, and yet—I want more! I’m not short of material, often I am overwhelmed by ideas, but I fail to elevate them to my ideal.”¹²⁰ Combined with the statement earlier about God’s voice speaking through his poetry, it seems obvious that the poetic presupposes the personal, yet transcends it. Andersen takes himself out of his art as much as he takes his art out of himself.

An additional—and related—complication is the uneasy relation between the real and the ideal, which he always contemplates, but never succeeds in negotiating. In quite blurred language he writes, in 1836 and still to the sisterly friend, that “poesy in our age here in Denmark [is] only the poetic, no everydayness and yet truth. The challenge is now to figure out how to grasp the decisive factor.”¹²¹ His equivocation may bespeak another labored effort to square the circle of life and art. First he seems to deplore that poetry in his land has no room for everyday life, but then he acknowledges its truth-value nonetheless. Still, the urge to seize the moment suggests that this self-perpetuating poetry does indeed lack oxygen and needs badly to be substantiated. But where is this oxygen to be found? Likely in a shift toward the characteristic details that distinguished late Romanticism and poetic realism, a shift toward the heightened modernity that Andersen pursued, and that enabled realistic rejuvenation to take place under merely formal maintenance of a poetic tradition now reclaimed, or preserved, for the advancement of the new.

Another expression of Andersen’s impossible but undaunted attempt to respond to the disjointed human condition of his age with poetic synergy can also be found among his letters. Writing a male recipient in 1838, he compares *Only a Fiddler* to his debut novel and calls the latter “the flower

me” (p. 291)—leaving the lauded author in a state of melancholy (p. 294).

¹¹⁹ *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 264; Andersen wrote this about the novel in 1836, before it was completed.

¹²⁰ *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 317.

¹²¹ *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 250.

of a spiritual maturity,” but the former “the fruit, but as it has only just formed, people shake their heads and say: the flower was more beautiful! To travel is the best school for me, but those people don’t give that a thought, and how could they?”¹²² Here he wraps it all up—what cannot be wrapped. Flower or fruit, beginning or end—which is which is ultimately subjective, dependent on the experience of the judge. What Andersen finds indisputable, at least in his own case, is the importance of the journey through the world and its trajectory from which a possible pattern can most authentically form between life’s stages. And where the never-ending interplay of life and art can become mutually enriching and immune to the pitfalls of uniformity. These are justifiable high marks for someone with the ambition he unabashedly spelled out in the earliest written letter cited here: “I am going to be Denmark’s first novelist!”¹²³

This essay opened with the promise of “a few memes and themes as venues for considering Andersen’s multifaceted authorial persona.” Consider the theme part fulfilled and allow me to turn to the few memes. But first a very basic definition of this concept: “A meme is a simple concept—a cultural idea that gets passed on from person to person—but affects so many areas of our lives, from our religion and our dress to what we eat and how we communicate. In short memes *are* culture. They are vastly important.”¹²⁴ And so is Andersen! Hence this brief exposé of his authorial voice visited thematically above, for our culture past and present. Why and in which ways the bearing of his nineteenth-century life and work remains a relevant focus for contemporary students of culture are the last questions to be addressed in this essay. Others have addressed it from different angles before, for instance the contributors to a fairly recent anthology on Andersen in the modern society (2014). Some titles and subtitles from the volume’s table of contents set the tone, such as “Andersen and modern popular culture”

¹²² *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 307.

¹²³ *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 250; Mogens Brøndsted quotes the same line in Brøndsted, “Efterskrift,” p. 280, and Paul Binding with his emphasis on the European perspective reminds us that precisely *Only a Fiddler’s* “enthusiastic reception in Germany (1838) ... would mark Andersen’s European breaththrough,” in Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 139; Andersen himself remarks on the upcoming German translation in an 1837 letter, cfr., *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 287.

¹²⁴ John Gunders and Damon Brown, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Memes*, New York: Alpha 2010, p. xvii; this definition is consistent with the one first offered by Richard Dawkins in 1976.

(about *Only a Fiddler*); “Breaking patterns” (as a theme in “The Galoshes of Fortune”); “H.C. Andersen’s social consciousness—a model for the modern Danish welfare state”; “H.C. Andersen—a Danish dream about the welfare society”; “H.C. Andersen: A cultural phenomenon in theory and practice”; and “The Never-Ending Andersen: On welfare themes in current retellings of H.C. Andersen’s fairy tales.”¹²⁵

As these citations suggest, some texts emphasize explicit Danish circumstances, quite understandable in a book published in Denmark and in Danish. But Andersen was also, as the subtitle of Paul Binding’s book about *Hans Christian Andersen* spells out, a *European Witness*, and it is this larger geographical and cultural perimeter, chiefly as marked in Binding’s chapter on *Only a Fiddler* (and “The Steadfast Tin Soldier”), and accessible in English, that will form the “memetic” horizon around my conclusion.

Andersen’s relation to both nation and modernity was shaped by circumstances well beyond his familiar world. Binding notes how his empathy for Denmark was deeply conflicted until political and military conflict on its southern border and with Prussia compelled him to write the patriotic song “In Denmark was I born, there I have [my] home.”¹²⁶ His attachment to the modern technological and material breakthroughs of his day was Janus-faced as well. He relished in new discoveries and inventions, but never failed to note when they cast a shadow on human life. Speaking more broadly, Europe’s political future in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, which Andersen would repeatedly observe firsthand, was equally up in the air, with revolutions, border contestations, and all the rest looming on the horizon. At the same time the continent offered a fertile ground for his creative imagination—and besides the humans of his novels and travelogues it is typically the animated birds in his tales and stories that traverse its alluring natural and cultural terrain, its countryside and urban centers, of which Denmark constitutes but a small, though not negligible part.¹²⁷ Most importantly, “since the Viking Age ... Danes have distinguished themselves more by intellectual and imaginative daring than by brute force, and Andersen provides us with four examples.”¹²⁸ These are the astronomer Tycho Brahe,

¹²⁵ *H.C. Andersen i det moderne samfund*, ed. by Anne Klara Bom, Jacob Bøggild, and Johs. Nørregaard-Frandsen, Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag 2014.

¹²⁶ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 1.

¹²⁷ Binding emphasizes, with respect to the Danes, “their extensive voyaging, their colonies, their wide mercantile endeavors—and also their vulnerability,” in Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 7.

the poet Adam Oehlenschläger, the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, and the scientist Hans Christian Ørsted—the latter three towering figures of the “Danish Golden Age,” with Ørsted an important mentor for Andersen.

“What unites these Danish swans?” asks Binding, and answers: their combined national and international repute, their advancement of knowledge—in the wake of European Enlightenment—as a scientific venture into the future but in partnership with the development of cultural tradition and artistic creativity. All were outstanding individuals with social and communal responsibility on their mind. It was for inclusion into this capital epicenter of the culture of his age that the proletarian Andersen journeyed from the backstreets of his provincial hometown, while his nation, despite its Golden Age spiritual feats, almost collapsed financially toward the end of the Napoleonic wars. Crisis as a word for such perilous socio-cultural disconnect, no matter how sublimated, was a salient part of Andersen’s native tongue as much as uncertainty was in the cards for all of Europe. In Binding’s rendition:

And were there not signs, which Andersen, like every major writer, not only sensed but embodied in art that, for this sizeable and uniquely favored section of humanity, conflicts of potentially catastrophic dimensions were probable, not to say inevitable? In making such signs artistically palpable Andersen proved his deep universality for he repeatedly transcended his Europeanness. Continually he lighted on constant, basic human, not to say animal, characteristics to be discovered in every continent, at every period...¹²⁹

Even if Binding may be overstating the case for Andersen’s “universality,” at least to the extent the term smacks of universalism, his account is not insensitive to all the fault lines that haunt the poet’s culture—be it Danish, European, or something even larger, and be it on the level of society or individuality. Revisiting some staples of Andersen’s novel *Only a Fiddler*—a primary text in his production as well as the key to the intertextual relationship between him and Kierkegaard, that other Danish Golden Age giant—within this framework, should substantiate my claim about Andersen’s “memetic” import.

Calling *Only a Fiddler* Andersen’s European breakthrough novel and “a most original one, a milestone in the history of the novel form,”¹³⁰ Binding reviews the usual suspects: the migratory bird metaphors and symbols and

¹²⁹ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 9.

¹³⁰ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 139.

the corresponding wanderings back and forth of the protagonists, Christian not least, whose life seems so similar to Andersen's in some respects, except in grossly failing, where the author's succeeds.¹³¹ The two lead characters' personal imbalances are duly noted, as are their troubling family situations; but not least Christian's plight, both on his own, as when he experienced "a dreamy image going out" and "the shadowy side of reality" emerging instead,¹³² and when he has a falling out with his environment—and with Naomi—is subject to Binding's discussion, which points out how these character complications are regrettably being dwarfed by artistic imbalances within the novel's composition (as Kierkegaard had rightly noted).¹³³

It all leads up to paragraphs about Naomi in France versus Christian in Denmark in which Binding sees an authorial value judgment that favors (Christian's) traditional Danish values over a life (Naomi's) "spent chasing after excitement, physical, emotional and cultural, in a culture that has lost its moral focus in exchange for wealth and luxury, and was spreading from France to infiltrate the rest of Europe."¹³⁴ This, however, is only what immediately meets the eye. "But on other levels there is multiple opacity," the elements of which Binding enumerates as follows:

the role of Nature's laws, of genetics and environment in determining the course of a life; the connection between pathology and art, between ambition and worldly success, and between both of these and those artistic self-realizations with true significance for others. *Who can really say where Christian went wrong, or whether it would have been possible for the stronger, higher-spirited Naomi to go right?*¹³⁵

Binding goes on to defend *Only a Fiddler* against its "too many periodic distortions and contractions," which may have resulted from the author taking on "too much thematically," by stating that "we cannot regret these imperfections; its intelligence, its frankness of confrontation and its emotional power are too strong."¹³⁶

These may all be valid points for a fair reviewer of the book to make.

¹³¹ While this is true, Andersen periodically identified with Christian, even with his self-pitying melancholy, as in an 1837 letter, in *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, p. 292.

¹³² Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 152; Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand*, p. 125.

¹³³ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 162.

¹³⁴ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 164.

¹³⁵ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 164; italics mine.

¹³⁶ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 164.

In making them, however, there is a risk of overshadowing the lines in the indented quote, which I italicized. For here, it seems, is the real rub. The more the author tries to tie his narrative as a ribbon around his characters—and their world—the more their fundamental untidiness protrudes. Despite its many shortcomings—even many of its strengths—the lasting value of *Only a Fiddler* is that of a sensitive barometer, designed for gauging pressures in the cultural and existential atmosphere, some high and some low, but all within the normal range. This precious value of perception, however, only comes to the fore as the pressures before it prove *out of the normal* and the barometer starts malfunctioning accordingly, at which point Binding is completely right in suggesting all attempts at reading the barometer are in vain.

Why did this character go wrong? Could that character have gone right? Only within a range of normality where the available instruments function can questions like these be meaningfully addressed. Andersen goes by the book as far as possible, so when his instrument falls short of gauging the state of the world, we can reasonably conclude that the normalcy (or the order) his approach was designed to meet with an interpretation has gone out of the window, and opacity and ambiguity are all that remain of the measurement scale—or outside it. As Binding puts it in his *Only a Fiddler* chapter's addendum about "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," this handicapped eponymous character "is put through sufferings as others are not. In compensation he earns himself a story."

But where is the meme in all this? Binding speaks in conclusion about Andersen's art and its audience, and this "double-speak" may be the "memetic" take away incarnate for my entire discussion:

in these very stories [Andersen] expressed what people wanted, what they *thought* they wanted, and what they knew they did not want. They wanted comfort, prosperity and social justice but were frightened of the ragamuffins outside their doors who inevitably could not be let in. They wanted order in society, in the international community, in religion, yet they were hampered by an inability to define these areas. They wanted to replace the obsolescent but were afraid of what might take its place. They believed in the individual less whole-heartedly than the Romantic generation had done, but were nevertheless reluctant to submerge him or her in a societal morass; they still placed a high evaluation on such personal achievements as staying true to oneself in the face of threats and dangers. They believed in love, yes, they esteemed love and its demands on lovers very much, but again, could they let it break up the social

orders, as Byron and Lamartine would have had it do?¹³⁷

Such were the conditions Andersen was up against. Binding is right in saying that he was a steadfast man “in his application to his writing, in his trust in his imagination and the meaning for others of the works it produced.”¹³⁸ But precisely because this steadfast man was a reliable barometer, the opacity and ambiguity of his measurements are clear indications that the world he takes in is anything but steadfast: shaken, torn, and new in a way no imagination can bridge or heal if it is going to be true to itself and its readers. At the same time, Andersen, the writer of fairy tales, always found magic at the bottom of reality—not away from reality. As a traveler he was an adventurer, not because he sought to escape reality, but because he sought reality; this *real* magic *adventure* (in Danish: *eventyr*) is the heart and pulse of his *fairy tales* (in Danish: *eventyr*). As Andersen’s native tongue aptly has it, his journey from the world to the story *telling* the world is a complex way of being; of really imagining/expecting something while realizing that this something may not be really there; of fostering an eerily open-ended vision, at once irresistible and too real for comfort.

Bibliography

Andersen, Hans Christian, *En Comedie i det Grønne*, in *Andersens Samlede Skrifter*, Vol. 10, 2nd edition, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1878.

— “Lykkens Kalosker” and “Den standhaftige Tinsoldat,” in his *Samlede Eventyr og Historier*, Vol. I, Copenhagen: Gyldendals Tranebøger 1962.

— *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1861-1863*, Vol. V, ed. by Tue Gad and Kirsten Weber, Copenhagen: DSL/Gad 1971.

— *H.C. Andersens Dagbøger 1864-1865*, Vol. VI, ed. by Kirsten Weber, Copenhagen: DSL/Gad 1972.

— *Kun en Spillemand. Original Roman i tre Dele*, tekststudgivelse, efterskrift og noter af Mogens Brøndsted. 1988, 2nd revised ed., Copenhagen: Danske Klassikere/Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab/Borgen 2004.

— *Breve fra H.C. Andersen*, ed. by C.St.A. Bille & Nicolaj Bøgh, 1878; 2nd ed., Copenhagen: Aschehoug 2005.

¹³⁷ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 171.

¹³⁸ Binding, *Hans Christian Andersen*, p. 171.

—— “The Galoshes of Fortune” and “The Steadfast Tin Soldier,” in his *Fairy Tales*, introduction and commentaries on the tales by Jack Zipes, textual annotations and trans. by Marte Hvam Hult, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics 2007.

Backhouse, Stephen, “Politics, Society, and Theology in Golden Age Denmark. Key Themes and Figures,” *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Chichester UK: Wiley/Blackwell 2015.

Binding, Paul, *Hans Christian Andersen. European Witness*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2014.

Bom, Anna Klara et al. (eds.), *H.C. Andersen i det moderne samfund*, Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag 2014.

Brandt, Frithiof and Hans Brix, “Dagens Børn,” *Nationaltidende*, January 31, 1930.

Bredsdorff, Thomas and Anne-Marie Mai (eds.), *100 Poems from the Medieval Period to the Present Day. Bilingual edition*, trans. by John Irons in cooperation with Klaus Høeck, Copenhagen & Seattle: Museum Tusulanum Press & University of Washington Press 2011.

Brostrøm, Torben, “Kritikerfejder og rollespil,” *Information*, March 4, 2011.

Brøndsted, Mogens, “H.C. Andersens personlighedsproblem,” in Jørgen Breitenstein et al., *H.C. Andersen og hans kunst i nyt lys*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 1976.

—— “Efterskrift,” in H.C. Andersen, *Kun en Spillemand. Original Roman i tre Dele*, tekstudgivelse, efterskrift og noter af Mogens Brøndsted. 1988. 2nd revised ed., Copenhagen: Danske Klassikere/Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab/Borgen 2004.

Detering, Heinrich, “*Intellectual Amphibia.*” *Homoerotisk Camouflage in Hans Christian Andersen’s Work*, Odense: Odense Universitet/H.C. Andersen-Centret 1991.

Gunders, Johan and Damon Brown, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Memes*, New York: Alpha 2010.

Houe, Poul, “Going Places. Hans Christian Andersen, the Great European Traveler,” in *Hans Christian Andersen. Danish Writer and Citizen of the World*, ed. by Sven Hakon Rossel, Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi 1996.

—— “Ud og op i verden. Om Andersen som den store europæiske rejsende,” in his *En anden Andersen—og andres. Artikler og foredrag 1969-2005*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2006.

—— “Literature and (Anti-)Humanism,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Chichester UK: Wiley/Blackwell 2015.

Estudios Kierkegaardianos. Revista de filosofía 2 (2016)

Jørgensen, Bo Hakon, “At tænke i eventyr,” in Jørgen Breitenstein et al., *H.C. Andersen og hans kunst i nyt lys*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 1976.

Kierkegaard, Søren, *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer*, in his *Samlede Værker*, 4th ed., Vol. 1, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1962.

— *From the Papers of One Still Living*, in *Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. with introduction and notes by Julia Watkin, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1990.

Kirmmse, Bruce H. (ed.), *Encounters with Kierkegaard. A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. by Bruce H. Kirmmse and Virginia R. Laursen, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press 1996.

Knudsen, Jakob, *At være sig selv*, ed. by Ole Wivel, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1965.

Kristensen, Sven Møller, “H.C. Andersen,” in his *Den dobbelte Eros. Studier i den danske romantik*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1966.

Mortensen, Klaus P, *Svanen og Skyggen—historien om unge Andersen*, Copenhagen: Gad 1989.

de Mylius, Johan, *Forvandlingens pris. H.C. Andersen og hans eventyr*, Copenhagen: Høst & Søn 2005.

Møller, Per Stig, *Erotismen. Den romantiske bevægelse i Vesteuropa 1790-1860*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1973.

Ringblom, Hilding, “Søren Kierkegaards besynderlige interesse for H.C. Andersens tredje roman *Kun en Spillemand*. Var der tale om et udfald fra det forhenværende vidunderbarn Søren mod det forhenværende vidunderbarn Hans Christian?,” *Anderseniana*, 2012.

Stock, Timothy, “Kierkegaard’s Theatrical Aesthetic from Repetition to Imitation,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Chichester UK: Wiley/Blackwell 2015.

Sørensen, Villy, “Om H.C. Andersens romaner,” in his *Hverken—eller. Kritiske betragtninger*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1961.