KIERKEGAARDIAN DESPAIR IN CONTEXT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON *THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH*

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Abstract: In 1849, Søren Kierkegaard published his systematic and dialectical definition of "despair" in his text *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaardian despair is defined as a spiritual malady resulting from misrelations between the internal components of our human selves, for which uncompromising faith is the one true salvation. On the surface, this text represents Kierkegaard's authorial turn toward a more polemical and critical theology in his later writing career. With attention to the text's urban and intellectual environment, this article strives to understand Kierkegaardian despair as an idea shaped by its distinct historical moment and urban audience. Scholarship on Kierkegaard is often divided between deeper textual or broader biographical studies; this article attempts to bridge the divide by engaging with textual devices through a historical lens. The modernization of Denmark and its intellectual *coteries* were crucial influences for Kierkegaard's critiques of modern Christendom and its spiritual crisis of despair.

Keywords: despair, faith, Copenhagen, consumption, modernity, Christendom

1. Introduction: Defining Despair

"The single individual is what I am fighting for, and it is true that the kingdom of Denmark has been and is the most hostile soil for this, for here coterie is everything."[1] Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) represents a significant turning point in his writing career, situated between his initial philosophical career of the early 1840s and his later polemical works of the early 1850s.[2] In this text, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus diagnoses humanity with a pervasive spiritual despair, defined as a misrelation between the internal aspects comprising a human self that results in a spiritual discordance *within* and *between* oneself and God. Anti-Climacus takes the perspective aspired to by Kierkegaard throughout his life as an author,

[1] SKS, 40, NB6:55 / KJN 6, 55.
[2] Clare Carlisle, "Publishing *The Sickness unto Death*: A Lesson in Double-Mindedness," in *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Sharon Krishek (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 39.

that of an "extraordinary Christian."[3] In the title, Anti-Climacus references the Biblical story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead, when Christ proclaims that a mortal death does not amount to suffering "the sickness unto death."[4] According to Anti-Climacus,

> to be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. . . . This sickness of the self [is] perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death.[5]

The desire to rid oneself of this burden and escape hopelessness arises as an essential human quality of despair, both its simultaneous defect and advantage.[6] One can attempt to escape despair in many ways, but for Anti-Climacus the difficult path of faith is its only salvation.[7] Notably, Anti-Climacus defines despair as a *universal*, pervasive, and multifarious sickness of the spirit through which one's relation to God is discordant or rejected entirely. It is thus striking, through the text, that Anti-Climacus also associates manifestations of this despair with *particular* personal, social, and ideological trends evident in the modernizing city of Copenhagen.[8]

Charles Taylor characterizes the post-Enlightenment period as an enculturation of the belief in humanity's ability to transform their own stance toward the world.[9] The technological and political optimism of this period in Europe simultaneously brought a "disenchantment, division, [and] fragmentation, in our stance to nature, to our self and meaning, and to each other."[10] The transformative potential of rationalism and its realization of human agency produced an industrial, "instrumental mode of life."[11] Kierkegaard's critical attitude toward nineteenth-century Christendom correlates with many elements of this characterization, and this is especially apparent in his diagnosis of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, which was shaped by societal developments in Denmark during the 1840s. His urban readership was experiencing a profound process of modernization, commercialization, and democratization during this

[3] Hereafter, I will refer to Anti-Climacus as the text's author; Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 596.
[4] The Holy Bible, New International Version, John 11.
[5] SKS 11, 133 / SUDH, 18.
[6] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 21.
[7] SKS 11, 135 / SUDK, 27.
[8] Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 4.
[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 449.
[10] Ibid., pp. 500–501.
[11] Ibid.

tumultuous decade. Many aspects of Kierkegaard's dialectical definition of despair reflect his observations of urbanizing Copenhagen, and contain criticisms aimed at prominent Danish Church figures whom he was personally acquainted with.

In Part One of *The Sickness unto Death,* Anti-Climacus writes that "a *human being* is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis," but a *self* is the relation between these two elements which then relates back to itself, so that "*this relation* is the positive third, and this is the self."[12] The pervasiveness of despair within the world, this text suggests, indicates a collective discordance within humans, and between humans and their faith.[13] These unconscious discordances within the self, manifesting in or cloaked by various earthly or temporal sufferings, exacerbate the inescapability of one's despair.[14] With reference to the Lazarus story, Anti-Climacus argues that Christianity teaches one the courage needed to face despair as the "sickness unto death" and to understand the radical impossibility of salvation without faith, through what Simon Podmore calls the "authentic sense of the immensity of the abyss of sin."[15] The process of understanding one's own despair is a central purpose of Kierkegaard's text and crucial to his critique of Christendom.

Part Two of the text both builds on and departs from the analysis of despair in Part One.[16] The forms of despair analyzed in Part One are reiterated through a greater Christian focus in Part Two, from which Anti-Climacus concludes that faith can only be achieved through a complete freedom from despair.[17] This religious shift is what Alastair Hannay sees as Kierkegaard's own personal response to the despair and "malaise of Danish society."[18] Despair is reframed as sin, and likewise within every form of sin there is an underlying despair. In *The Sickness unto Death,* despair before God takes the shape of three conscious forms of sin: despairing over one's sin, despairing over the forgiveness of sin, and the despair of rejecting Christianity entirely.[19] The acceptance of one's sinfulness before God—that is, one's condition of being in despair—and the overcoming of despair through hope, love, and charity represent the

[12] SKS 11, 129 / SUDK, 19 (emphasis added).
[13] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 20.
[14] SKS 11, 124 / SUDK, 14.
[15] SKS 11, 124 / SUDK, 14; Podmore, "Lazarus and the Sickness unto Death: An Allegory of Despair," pp. 488–489, 511–514.
[16] Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard,* ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 342.
[17] Roe Fremstedal, "Sin, Despair, and the Self," in *Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death: A Critical Guide,* ed. Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 121.
[18] Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," p. 344.
[19] Fremstedal, "Sin, Despair, and the Self," p. 118.

"noninstrumental goods essential to coherent selfhood," [20] a movement of the self which seemingly responds to what Charles Taylor characterizes as the despair experienced through the "instrumental" modern life.

This article will analyze Kierkegaard's concept of despair and situate it within mid-nineteenth-century Denmark. The city rapidly transitioned from a medieval, monarchical city to a highly congested, urbanized, and politically shifting capital, producing a rich array of novel social phenomena.[21] In section one, I will argue that this urban backdrop was fundamental to shaping Kierkegaard's observational philosophy, and to the publication of the text, by highlighting examples of urban change, bourgeois life, and commerciality, which structure the text's analysis of despair. In section two, I will focus on the influence of Danish Church figures on the critical theology of *The Sickness unto Death*—figures who inspire representations of Kierkegaard's disapproval of contemporary religion and the spiritlessness of his age. In section three, I will extend this argument to include Kierkegaard's distaste for emerging forms of bourgeois consumption, which created an ambiguous tension between the invisibility of faith and the visibility of class and leisure. Kierkegaard implicitly and explicitly situated the text in relation to an urban audience that it attempted to diagnose and treat. The dialectical and theological qualities of despair can be reconsidered against this backdrop of Kierkegaard's own context and his intended audience.

2. The Modern City in *The Sickness unto Death*

Lasse Horne Kjældegaard has suggested that the mid-nineteenth century was an "original age of anxiety" with rapid social, technological, and intellectual changes brought on by the acceleration of industrialization.[22] Challenging the nomenclature of the "Danish Golden Age" (c. 1800–1850), recent secondary scholarship sides with Kierkegaard's own perspective to resist a Romantic and progressivist view of history during this time period.[23] Copenhagen suffered a significant economic depression and military losses following the Napoleonic Wars, during which British vessels bombed the capital's harbor and the Danish lost control of Norway.[24] This period of urban

[20] Ibid., pp. 122–127; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 500.
[21] David Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter: An Edifying and Polemical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 33.
[22] Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, *The Original Age of Anxiety: Essays on Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries* (Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 4–9.
[23] Ibid., p. 12.
[24] John Lippitt and George Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 29.

weakness, despite a cultural flourishing of art throughout the beginning of the century, accentuated the visibility of commercial and political change within Copenhagen. Kierkegaard spends the entirety of *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* developing his interpretation of anxiety, the "dizziness of freedom" arising from a realization of the infinite possibilities of change, and its manifestation in despair. These texts, the former penned and published in 1844, the latter in 1849, were shaped by Kierkegaard's interpretation of urban life in Copenhagen and present a drastically new approach to faith. I will argue that Kierkegaard's critiques of the weakened urban and rural forms of Christianity in Denmark were greatly influenced by this context of societal change.

Part One of *The Sickness unto Death* centers around a distinctly observational and psychological analysis of despair, pretexting Anti-Climacus' theological argument in Part Two. I will therefore argue that Part One requires a particular focus on contextualization to understand Anti-Climacus' description of despair. Organized in an ascending "ladder of despair," the increasing consciousness of the self from physical to psychical faculties results in a progression of despair from unconscious, to conscious, and finally to defiant forms of despair.[25] Anti-Climacus first examines a psychological understanding of despair without the revelation of the individual's relation to God—a first rung on the ladder of despair.[26] For example, one's inner despair can be foremost caused by unconsciously allowing the self to be absorbed in external pleasures, what Anti-Climacus calls "living in immediacy."[27] This may involve the pursuits of physical beauty, wealth, fame, developing one's talents or becoming an "efficient" and instrumentalized individual in the modern economy.[28] This unconscious despair arises from the pursuit of maximum pleasure, minimum pain, and a harmony between the physical and psychical qualities of the human being without any ethical responsibility for one's own choices.[29] The increasing severity of despair toward states of increased consciousness, such as the creation of one's own ethical viewpoint separate from faith in God, which develops into an ultimate "demonic" rejection of God with the belief in oneself as essentially self-created.[30] Anti-Climacus' psychological analysis

[25] Ibid., pp. 111, 117; Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 101–103.
[26] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 96.
[27] SKS 11, 166 / SUDK, 69.
[28] Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1996), p. 93.
[29] Ibid., p. 88; Edward F. Mooney, *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 336–337.
[30] SKS 11, 193–195 / SUDK, 103–104.

of despair therefore relates to the dissonances existing between components of the self and their interactions with a rapidly shifting urban and social environment—the interplay between self and city, faith and vocation.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard's works, as *The Sickness unto Death* shows, point toward a need for an internal, invisible, and incredibly difficult movement toward faith, which entails accepting one's sin and resting oneself in God's will.[31] As Roe Fremstedal suggests, Part One presents a problem of the self that we cannot solve on our own, and Part Two moves on to spiritually diagnosing and treating despair in the "theological self," requiring an awareness of being in relation to God.[32] Contrary to the outward trends of the time, Kierkegaard thus directed the individual's attention inward. His notion of despair requires a subjective approach; despite the pervasiveness of the malady in society more generally, only individuals can apprehend and respond to the condition of despair. The ultimate manifestation of the Christian became, to Kierkegaard, the idealized "knight of faith" who lives a simple and non-ascetic life within the modern world, resting their balance of selfhood "transparently in the power that established it."[33]

Kierkegaard earned a public reputation for quite literally *observing* life in Copenhagen and translating these experiences into his nightly writings. Spending the daylight hours wandering the city, often meeting and strolling with companions, Kierkegaard would return to his study and write by candlelight into late hours of the night.[34] Often seen as a social recluse, despite his personable reputation amongst his closest interlocutors, he came to epitomize a certain wandering and perceptive quality of the modern philosophical thinker. Bruce Baugh has situated Kierkegaard's philosophical style in the emerging nineteenth-century occupation of the *flâneur*, a creative wanderer immersed in their environment.[35] The *flâneur* was a modern phenomenon ridiculed by some foreign critics, particularly those critical of Copenhagen which was seen as a congested and backward medieval city with a vanity-obsessed bourgeois culture of aspirational Parisian styles.[36] Kierkegaard's reference to himself as a *flâneur* in his work

[31] Roe Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion: Purity or Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 122–123.
[32] Ibid., pp. 114, 121.
[33] Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 142; SKS 11, 242 / SUDK, 131.
[34] Bruce Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," in *Philosophers' Walks*, ed. Bruce Baugh (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2022), p. 116.
[35] Ibid., pp. 113–114.
[36] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 46.

The Point of View for My Work as an Author (composed in 1848 and posthumously published in 1855) is in reference to his public perception in Copenhagen: "a street-corner loafer, an idler, a *flâneur*, a frivolous bird."[37] Kierkegaard's ability to skillfully converse with anyone in the city and penchant for walking with friends arm-in-arm likely provided him with a consistent stream of insight into contemporary culture and significantly broadened his conception of despair.[38] It is possible that the *Corsair* magazine's ridiculing of Kierkegaard's unusual behavior in 1846, after which his disdain for Copenhagen only intensified, struck him so deeply due to his fondness for such wandering.[39] Furthermore, Kierkegaard reflects on the dangers of his popularity as an author, stating that he "found a satisfaction in that life, in that inverted deception . . . that I was in vogue proclaiming a gospel of worldliness."[40] He stresses the importance of resisting the temptations of success, and instead strives "to safeguard an existence in absolute isolation . . . against worldly esteem and against the bestial flattery of the crowd."[41] Kierkegaard's contemplations on the ambiguous *flâneur,* one who both stands out and blends in, may represent his awareness of its unique vantage point for seeing various states of despair around Copenhagen.[42]

Anti-Climacus, the extraordinary Christian, assumes this observational viewpoint to both analyze and critique despair in urban society. Such examples of despair permeate the text, including descriptions of men who lose themselves to worldly pursuits of success, business, marriage, and family life, forgetting their spiritual self and blending into the urban crowd.[43] Anti-Climacus describes every self as "angular," but one that "is to be polished" instead of being "ground down" when becoming part of the crowd—a loss of individualism all too noticeable in the congested markets of Copenhagen.[44] Hindered by its restrictive and medieval foundations, this "Golden Age" saw Copenhagen become the most crowded European city of its time, with an average of two square meters of housing per person.[45] Through observing commercial activity in

[37] SKS 16, 42 / PV, 61.
[38] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 115.
[39] There is evidence that Kierkegaard almost entirely ceased to be seen publicly after the *Corsair*'s mocking articles about him in 1846, which may suggest his writing of *The Sickness unto Death* occurred in a more private context and with a lesser degree of wandering, perhaps while synthesizing observations made earlier; Clare Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), pp. 193–194.
[40] SKS 16, 43 / PV, 62.
[41] SKS 16, 40 / PV, 59.
[42] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 115.
[43] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[44] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[45] Horne Kjældgaard, *The Original Age of Anxiety*, pp. 11–12.

Copenhagen, which he constantly ridiculed as a "market-town," Kierkegaard imbues his critique of public life with a financial diction. The despairing self that strives for success grinds itself down to be "smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* as a circulating coin," and is unconscious of its own despair, as the loss of "five rixdollars" is more noticeable than the loss of oneself.[46]

Kierkegaard dedicates one lengthy footnote in this section of *The Sickness unto Death* to describing the state of "feminine despair."[47] Anti-Climacus describes feminine despair as lacking the "decisive sense" and "intellectuality" for *defiance*, and instead as arising primarily from a *weakness* of not willing to become oneself.[48] Moreover, despairing due to "lacking primitivity" or the inability to assert oneself results in "emasculation," and Kierkegaard uses the distinctly gendered term "*afmandet*."[49] Anti-Climacus writes, "devotedness is a woman's sole possession . . . but the fact that devotedness is the woman's nature reappears in despair and returns as the mode of despair."[50] Anti-Climacus may be directly speaking to a perception of new bourgeois preoccupations with Parisian fashions, excessive consumption, and social comparison, which are seen to corrupt one's devotional nature and impede on an individual's deeper self. Anti-Climacus thus seems to echo many of the contemporary conservative critiques of the lascivious and tasteless cosmopolitan culture emerging in Copenhagen, viewing women as particularly harmed by these new trends. The Romantic view of Nature as feminine, free, and immediate may have influenced Kierkegaard's discussion of some forms of despair as "feminine," as this section of the text is situated directly before his discussion of the "man of immediacy."[51] Anti-Climacus takes a perspective which links femininity with devotion as an instinctive spirituality which can "see more clearly when blind than does the most sighted reflection."[52] Stressing the importance of rightful devotion as a sense beyond the faculties of sight, Anti-Climacus appears to associate feminine despair with the markedly visual "culture of spectatorship" and new social interests in stereoscopy, the daguerreotype, photography, and theater.[53] The visual and comparative nature of fashion at this time was seen to provoke a constant exchange of glances, directing one's gaze toward worldly materialities

[46] SKS 11, 148 / SUDK, 43; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 63.
[47] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[48] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65.
[49] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44; Bruce H. Kirmmse, ""Out with It!": The Modern Breakthrough, Kierkegaard and Denmark," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 31.
[50] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[51] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, pp. 57–58.
[52] SKS 11, 164 / SUDK, 65–66.
[53] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 47.

instead of spiritual selfhood.[54] As with many of Kierkegaard's dialectical analyses of despair, his pseudonym Anti-Climacus seems to believe this inner potential for feminine devotion is misdirected toward the temptations of appearance and hedonism.

Further to the despair which emerges from an imbalance toward worldly obsession, Anti-Climacus writes that this may result in ethical narrow-mindedness, rejecting the higher demands of the self by merely becoming a number and living out a repetitive existence of "perpetual monotony (*Einerlei*)."[55] With no dreams or hope, an individual becomes bounded by fatalism and "necessity" itself becomes their God.[56] One forgets themselves amidst a crowd of others and conforms by "busying oneself with all sorts of worldly matters."[57] This swaying of the self into complete finitude and worldly obsession has been interpreted as characteristic of the aesthete figure, which is seen as an "organized self, but not self-organized" and lacking an inherent value from within.[58] Anti-Climacus sees the "heart of happiness" and its ideals of tranquility, security, and satisfaction as the hotbed of despair, as despair becomes more pronounced through its concealment.[59] Such an approach to life may also develop toward being overly prudent and produce a kind of political or spiritual silence.[60] When one never ventures beyond this comfortable silence, Anti-Climacus appears to mirror Kierkegaard's own critiques of the rampant urban press as a vocal minority amidst a voiceless urban crowd. Anti-Climacus asks himself:

> For if I have ventured wrongly, well then, life helps me with chastisement. But if I have not ventured at all, who will help me then? . . . I cravenly win every earthly advantage—and lose myself![61]

A balance must be struck between the forces of infinitude and finitude in the self, as both states of imbalance are forms of despair exacerbated by the intellectual and social life of Denmark in the late 1840s.

Leading on from his analysis of anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*, freedom becomes crucial to the experience of despair as described in *The Sickness unto Death,* as it directly relates to human will.[62] The experience of anxiety and the consciousness of human

[54] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, p. 21.
[55] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[56] SKS 11, 156 / SUDK, 53; John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 108.
[57] SKS 11, 149 / SUDK, 44.
[58] Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," pp. 336–339.
[59] SKS 11, 138–143 / SUDK, 31–35.
[60] SKS 11, 150 / SUDK, 45.
[61] SKS 11, 150–151 / SUDK, 45–46.
[62] SKS 11, 144–146 / SUDK, 38.

freedom is the criterion which distinguishes humans from animals.[63] The two forms of conscious despair, according to Anti-Climacus, occur when the self "wills *not* to be itself" out of *weakness*, or "wills to be itself" out of *defiance*.[64] Anti-Climacus' short parable of a tenant who chooses to live in their home's cellar instead of the first or second floors, symbolizes the preference of many people to only occupy the sensuous and "primitive" faculties of the self.[65] The ludicrous and self-centered nature of despair is revealed, as no outsider could ever suggest the tenant live in the *belle étage*, as it is their own home![66] Kierkegaard's personification of the home as the self, privately tiered and structured for a certain destined style of living, illustrates some direct influence of contemporary urbane living in Copenhagen on his thought.

The bourgeois home became a place of physical self-fashioning as well as personal mystique, and the privatization of upper stories resembles the inward and spiritual contemplations of the self.[67] Hans Christian Andersen's *The Shadow* (1847) is an obscure text warning against the dangers of learnedness and self-image, in which the fellow Danish writer articulates the symbolic bourgeois status granted to houses lining the streets of Copenhagen.[68] Theodor Adorno goes even further, analyzing Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity as reflecting his contemporary value for the "*intérieur*"—the physical and private space of the upper-class home.[69] Drawing from these analyses, *The Sickness unto Death* was undoubtedly conceived in a divided residential space where the interiority of the self was privileged over the outside world, in radical separation from the "others" of society.[70] Just as Kierkegaard was only seen writing in his home by candlelight during the late hours of the night, his philosophical process was similarly enclosed in these hidden upper stories of his four-story home on Rosenborggade.[71] After moving into this apartment in April 1848 while writing his text, Kierkegaard was met with the unfortunate and percolating stench of nearby tanneries,

[63] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 352.
[64] SKS 11, 130 / SUDK, 20; Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 101 (emphasis added).
[65] SKS 11, 158–160 / SUDK, 56–57.
[66] SKS 11, 158 / SUDK, 57.
[67] See also Petra Ten-doesschate Chu, "Fragmentation and Bricolage in Victor Hugo's Hauteville House," *Word & Image (London, 1985)* 37, no. 1 (2021).
[68] Hans Christian Andersen, *Stories and Tales*, trans. H. W. Dulcken (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 378–380.
[69] Henriette Steiner, "On the Unhomely Home: Porous and Permeable Interiors from Kierkegaard to Adorno," *Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture* 1 (2010): p. 137.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 116; Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 532–533.

inescapable even in his residential privacy.[72] Joakim Garff suggests that Kierkegaard's focus on the balance of the self-synthesis in *The Sickness unto Death* reflects the importance "*harmony* was to the neoclassical house in Rosenborggade where it was written."[73] The existence of despair in one's self as compared to the disharmony of willingly living in one's cellar challenges some of the common metaphors for despair in medieval and early modern devotional texts. Rather than an image of despair as an individual hopelessly lost at sea, a poisonous snake striking from the weeds, or a spiritual trial to conquer on the path to holiness, Kierkegaard instead chooses an urbanized image for despair as a simple choice in living and comfort.[74] The cellar tenant parable may have been directed toward his fellow bourgeois residents, challenging the perceived security and status of the home. The despair one faces cannot be shielded against with this symbolic structure of security and success, as it lingers in its very foundations like a miserable odor.

3. The Danish Peoples' Church in *The Sickness unto Death*

The theological and religious context enmeshing Kierkegaard's authorship in Denmark is crucial to his critical and diagnostic writings on despair. Lutheranism held ideological prominence in urbanized Denmark, which Kierkegaard saw as central to the emergence of Danish Christendom and its compromises with the secular world. Kierkegaard's thought was shaped by many aspects of this religious context, however he came to associate Lutheran theology with a broader weakness and complacency of the Reformed Church toward Luther's original teachings.[75] Luther stressed the importance of the individual's relationship with God as one of love and exceeding all mediation and ethical law, which constitute forms of corrupt human reason—a crucial basis for Kierkegaard's concept of the "teleological suspension of the ethical."[76] Luther

[72] Kierkegaard's expenses on lavish meats and food suggest a considerable amount of time was spent within his home, particularly in the evenings when he preferred to write. Following Garff's conclusion, his greatest expenses being for food and carriage rides suggest a tension between the need to write and desire to escape the unsanitary city with trips to the countryside. See also Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 534–540.

[73] Ibid., p. 541.

[74] Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 169–171.

[75] Michael Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, no. 2 (1983): pp. 256–257.

[76] The teleological suspension of the ethical is the movement of faith in Kierkegaard's interpretation of the binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. All ethical beliefs are suspended in a paradoxical movement of complete faith in God's mercy. See also Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 135; and Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 83.

also saw the productive capacity of despair for religious becoming, as a precursor to hope and a pathway for God to heal the self from the abyss of inevitable struggle.[77] In believing one is damned, depraved, and sinful, one can initiate a progression from complacency or false belief to eventual hope in God's salvation.[78]

In addition to the particular Danish context of Lutheranism, despair in the Christian tradition can be traced back to earlier conceptions of dread and Godly fear: states of emotive hopelessness with the spiritual purpose of redirecting one's morality and faith toward God.[79] The medieval Christian conceptions of despair may have had an important theological effect on Kierkegaard's concern with subjectivity based on early forms of Christian existentialism. Paul Megna stresses the importance of this longer tradition prior to Kierkegaard, and despite Kierkegaard's more explicit reference to contemporary philosophy in *The Sickness unto Death*, the impact of Christian understandings of despair in the *longue durée* should still be considered.[80] Affective states such as dread and melancholy were central to many mystical and ascetic Christian traditions, which sought to achieve authentic faith through negative emotions; to "dread lovingly."[81] The importance of these emotive states in worship were echoed throughout medieval worship, particularly in St. Anselm's affective piety which influenced many devotional texts and public sermons—what Sarah McNamer terms the "emotional scripts" of dread-based worship.[82]

By the nineteenth century, melancholy had gathered a complex mix of connotations and was seen to manifest in temporary spouts of apathy and ill-humor, a residue of hereditary sin even in the faithful.[83] While a "cult of melancholy" appeared in Romantic artistic circles as a response to nineteenth-century optimism in human progress, this emotional state traces back to the Christian notion of "acedia" as a sinful, spir-

[77] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 252.
[78] Elizabeth Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God: Luther, Kierkegaard, and the Binding of Isaac* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), p. 145.
[79] Paul Megna, "Better Living through Dread: Medieval Ascetics, Modern Philosophers, and the Long History of Existential Anxiety," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 130, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1286, 1294.
[80] Ibid., p. 1285. See also Paul Megna, "Dreadful Devotion," in *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
[81] Ibid., p. 1288.
[82] Ibid., pp. 1286–1288.
[83] Mooney, *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, pp. 149–150.

itual sloth, and was often the target of the emotive Moravian sermons that Kierkegaard attended with his father.[84] Augustine considers the "chaste fear" of being severed from God's love as having a highly productive quality for faith, such as the power of dread in the trial of Abraham.[85] Augustine greatly inspired Luther's assertion of the corruption of human reason and inescapability of sin in the Augsburg Confession (1530), based on which Kierkegaard acknowledged anxiety as the precondition to this inherited sin, and despair as its final result.[86] Christian figures such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe engaged in forms of emotive worship through a fear and dread of God, which was a method of ridding oneself of doubt and gaining an authentic hope for salvation.[87] While Kierkegaard was writing for the "common man" and against the Danish bourgeois elite, his vision of faithfulness was not an ascetic world-denial through this medieval form of dreadful devotion but diverged as an overcoming of one's despair through an inner relationship of faith.[88] Despite some emotive qualities of despair surfacing in the text, *The Sickness unto Death* largely distances itself from these older Christian conceptions of despair as an external threat beyond the human will or as a form of devotion.[89] The emotional concepts of dread and melancholy can be viewed in adjacency to despair through their shared tradition in Christian upbuilding literature for the individual. However, Kierkegaardian despair has a restrictively dialectical basis and, for the most part, resists emotive interpretation by focusing on the depth of despair within selfhood and beyond feeling.

Many of Kierkegaard's contemporary theologians, including the Grundtvigians, Jakob Peter Mynster, and Johann Ludvig Heiberg, followed the German Protestant ethic and shaped the Danish Church around the values of education, citizenship, family, public order, and religious personalism.[90] Kierkegaard saw these tamer Lutheran values as domesticating the intensity of *imitatio Christi* and the ideals of Lutheran orthodoxy, and *The Sickness unto Death* instead seeks to reignite uncompromising Biblical faith within the modern subject.[91] While Luther saw despair as in constant flux with

[84] Alastair Hannay, "Despair as Defiance: Kierkegaard's Definitions in 'The Sickness unto Death,'" *Open Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2018): p. 41; Megna, "Better Living through Dread," p. 1295; and Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 77.
[85] Megna, "Better Living through Dread," pp. 1288–1289.
[86] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, pp. 80, 83.
[87] Megna, "Better Living through Dread," pp. 1291–1293.
[88] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 265–266; Christopher B. Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Soren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 35.
[89] Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy*, pp. 170–71.
[90] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 249–252.
[91] Ibid., pp. 255–257.

states of hope, Anti-Climacus interprets despair as the misrelations within the self *before* faith can be achieved.[92] In both cases, sin is the pervasive and constant force affecting humanity; however, Kierkegaard sees despair as universal, largely unconscious, and situated before faith, not in tandem with it.[93] To Kierkegaard, the God-relationship is essential to conceiving one's morality, and freeing one from despair.[94] Luther's analysis of the binding of Isaac differs from Kierkegaard's, as Luther situates Abraham's despair in his hesitancy of faith during a spiritual trial and considers the story to be evidence for the hopelessness of humanity when relying on rationality without faith.[95] Luther thus considers despair as a periodic spiritual lack of hope and presence of the devil which has the utility of redirecting one toward faith—a framework that only partially influences Kierkegaard's deeper and more dialectical conception of despair.[96]

Kierkegaardian despair departs from this Lutheran theology and adapts to several elements of nineteenth-century idealism and dialectical philosophy. Luther's passive state of sinfulness only forms the premise of Kierkegaard's definition of sin. In *The Sickness unto Death,* Anti-Climacus references the Augsburg Confession in which "a revelation from God is required in order to enlighten the human being about what sin is and how deeply it is lodged," but follows this definition with a suggestion that it "still needs to be completed" and that sin is "before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself."[97] Anti-Climacus is challenging the Socratic notion of sin as ignorance that requires a revelation of sin's deepness within the self. This ignores the need to overcome an *unwillingness* (rather than ignorance) of the self in order to understand one's sinfulness.[98] The importance of will is where Anti-Climacus departs from these earlier concepts of sin. Kierkegaard places faith as a much higher qualifier of the self by binarily opposing it to sin, most likely perceiving a greater threat in modernity's disregard for the essential intensity of Christian ideals. The definition of sin as despair extends beyond the passive hereditary sin of Luther into an active form of sin, continuously manifesting through one's becoming and as a perpetual and self-consuming sickness.[99]

[92] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, p. 148.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, p. 104.
[95] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, pp. 84–89.
[96] Ibid., pp. 145–146.
[97] SKS 11, 208 / SUDK, 125, 182; Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion*, p. 113.
[98] SKS 11, 207–208 / SUDK, 124–125.
[99] SKS 11, 134 / SUDK, 26.

Kierkegaard's relationship with his contemporary theologians in Copenhagen is one of deep resistance and critique, despite their many personal influences on his life. His perspectives on contemporary society and religion are formulated as textual oppositions to those of various appointed Church officials in Denmark. Merold Westphal characterizes Kierkegaard's philosophical approach as one of "ideology critique," in that "his quarrel with prevailing theory has its *telos* in his quarrel with prevailing practice."[100] In the context of the ongoing establishment of a constitutional parliament in Denmark, Kierkegaard witnessed growing protest and unrest in 1848 outside the city hall on Nytorv, the street on which he resided when writing *The Sickness unto Death*.[101] A new Danish nationalism emanating from this urban crowd evoked particular concern in him—a concern over the loss of the individual and the diminishing influence of the Danish Peoples' Church.[102] Kierkegaard's application of despair to these contextual events is clear—the loss of one's individual, inner faith to a barbarous mass leaves one spiritually astray while intellectual *coteries* and secular governance displace religious authority. In his private journals he writes, "the 'masses' are, by definition, always misled—for if they were led in the right way, there would be no masses; when they are correctly guided, eternally understood, there are no masses."[103] The perpetual "dying" of individualistic faith and selfhood, which is the cause for widespread inner despair, is a central argument of *The Sickness unto Death*. Contemporary theologians in Denmark became central figures for Kierkegaard's critiques of Christendom, as he saw them as pandering to this crowd and mistakenly reconciling religion with nationalism, Romanticism, and secular ideologies.

N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) was a key theologian of the early nineteenth century in Denmark, having been raised in a Pietistic-Lutheran home and deeply influenced by Schelling and other Romantics in his attempts to revive a sense of nationalism for Denmark.[104] Grundtvig then became an influential figure for the Danish Pietist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, emerging predominantly from its longer history in Moravia and the Western Jutland countryside.[105] This spiritualist movement found prominence in the freedom of faith driven by a common "folk spirit," and placed devotion and awakening above dogma and orthodoxy.[106] Drawing poetic connections

[100] Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 120.
[101] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 59–60.
[102] SKS 20, 339–340, NB4:114 / KJN 4, 340–341.
[103] SKS 20, 330, NB4:87 / KJN 4, 331.
[104] Martin Schwarz Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 206.
[105] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 76–77.
[106] Ibid., p. 76; Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, p. 214.

between Danish-Nordic mythology and Christian scripture, Grundtvig's idealistic theology of a free church for a free congregation was difficult to reconcile with Lutheran *sola scriptura*, which contradicted the desire to emulate a free church as it would have existed before the written New Testament.[107] Grundtvig came to occupy a polarizing position within the reforming Danish Peoples' Church and many conservative theologians opposed his Pietistic views of individual subjective awakening.[108] In an 1810 sermon, Grundtvig criticized priestly chatter as an overuse of human communication for divine teaching, echoing Kierkegaard's dislike of the same urban and rural priestly classes who preached from safety and luxury.[109] Despite the similarities between Grundtvig's and Kierkegaard's subjective religiosity and between their mixed Lutheran and Pietistic upbringings, Kierkegaard critiqued Grundtvig in a similar fashion to Hegel; too much importance was placed on historicizing Christianity to find a universal understanding of faith through human nature and civilizational progress.[110] Within the context of the democratizing Peoples' Church, Kierkegaard criticized both the extreme Grundtvigian and elite-priestly wings. He saw the popular lay movement of spiritual renewal as destabilizing Church authority, while the existing priestly authority were failing to live by scriptural teachings and secluded themselves in private exorbitance.[111] Freedom of religion was constitutionally ensured in June 1849, resulting in the Danish Peoples' Church becoming established by law and civic rights being ensured to Danes regardless of religious affiliation.[112] Kierkegaard's fear of a spiritless and secular age was becoming a reality.

The production and publishing of *The Sickness unto Death* occurred at the end of a crucial decade for the restructuring of the Danish government and the establishment of the Danish Peoples' Church. The uncertain future of these radical revolts against absolutism in Denmark is reflected in Anti-Climacus' critical tone within this text, especially through his critiques of life in Copenhagen and its intelligentsia, the nexus of which was the state of despair. The 1848 democratic revolutions occurring across Europe demanded universal male suffrage and the creation of a parliamentary form of governance.[113] Many of Kierkegaard's contemporaries in the Danish Church were also deeply critical of this secularizing pressure. Jakob Peter Mynster (1775–1854) mirrored many of Kierkegaard's critiques of the democratic revolt in Denmark, along with

[107] Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, pp. 207–211.
[108] Ibid., p. 214.
[109] Ibid., p. 206.
[110] Ibid., p. 275; Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 18, 27–30.
[111] Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, pp. 163, 206; Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, pp. 621–622.
[112] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 210.
[113] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 30–31.

the speculative and totalizing philosophy of Hegel which ran counter to both of their theologies of religious personalism.[114] Mynster had a short-lived, but positive, influence on Kierkegaard's theology of despair, as Kierkegaard partly understood Mynster's view of Christianity as a place for relief from the world before his critical turn against religious complacency in the late-1840s.[115] For a time, Kierkegaard agreed that he found solace praying under the statue of Christ in the Church of Our Lady; however, he developed a stark sense of opposition between the Church and the world after his critique of comfort-seeking and the delusions of despair.[116] Despite Mynster's monarchical and social conservatism, Kierkegaard severed his allegiance with his father's priest, attacking his expensive dining habits and his association with the rest of the elegantly urban theologians of a weakened faith.[117] Mynster's dismissal of Kierkegaard's request to become a pastor in June 1849 brewed a terrible disappointment in him, and may have been due to Kierkegaard's public ridicule in *Corsair*—three days later, Kierkegaard sent away the manuscript of *The Sickness unto Death* for publication and committed to his pathway of isolated, critical authorship.[118] Bruce Kirmmse argues that Kierkegaard may be making implicit reference to Mynster in a section of the text where he describes an individual who believes they understand Christ's suffering while seeking pleasantry and thanking God for their happiness.[119] The extreme difficulty of living in faith was a belief which fundamentally shaped Kierkegaard's highly critical viewpoint of weak, philosophized forms of faith.

Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–1884), a popular young pastor succeeding Mynster, brought a more liberal-Hegelian theology which prioritized both experience and individualism.[120] However, he appeared to Kierkegaard as merely sanctifying worldly pursuits and bourgeois culture.[121] In a similar fashion to Kierkegaard's critiques of the democratic revolution and its threat to Church governance, Martensen championed an "eclectic theology" of plurality, drawing from idealism, Romanticism, orthodoxy, and conservatism.[122] His ties with Hegelian systematization and attempts at rational-

[114] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 619; Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 252.
[115] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 619.
[116] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," pp. 128–132; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 81–84.
[117] Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 622.
[118] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 211.
[119] SKS 11, 204 / SUDK, 119, 180.
[120] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 253.
[121] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 17–18.
[122] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," p. 253.

izing Christianity fiercely stoked Kierkegaard's opposition. Anti-Climacus sees Christendom's great suffering as the increasingly popular doctrine of the "God-Man," a growing sense of indifference between humanity and God.[123] Under the influence of Martensen's speculative philosophy, the separation of humans from God has been "abolished, first in dignified, speculative fashion, then by the mob in the streets and alleys," and Martensen has spread a "doctrine of the superiority of the generation over the individual."[124] This doctrine is disastrous not only for the Christian individual, but also dangerously enticing for the belief that one can escape their own despair through secular or collective pursuits. It is amidst his rejection of uniformity with his theological peers that Kierkegaard defines his own all-encompassing critique of the pervasive despair in the secular world and established Church, and the dangers of harmonizing the paradoxical, radical, and deeply emotive Christian life with the allures of modern consumption.

4. Despair and Consumption

The increasingly public culture of theatergoing, artistic consumption, pedestrianism, and the loosening of limitations on public assembly and press during this decade of democratic reform greatly influenced Kierkegaard's criticisms of aesthetic living and the urban crowd. The emergence of a new visual culture shaped by early photographic technology and new habits of leisurely consumption had particular resonances for Kierkegaard's view of human despair.[125] In his eyes, new forms of consumerism represented a loss of spiritual vigor, including the belief that one can shape themselves through their appearance and visuality, to become oneself *through* others.[126] While mirroring a common conservative religious stance—to preserve the influence and tradition of the Church—Kierkegaard rejected reconciliatory approaches aimed at harmonizing secular and religious life. Copenhagen's modernization was irredeemable to Anti-Climacus, as it exacerbated one's state of spiritual despair through a loss of the "eternal" in man to pleasurable worldly pursuits and the aesthetic life.[127] This culture of consumption grew through the emergence of "Golden Age" theater and the adoption of Parisian styles in street design.[128] Østergade was a notoriously thin, cramped

[123] SKS 11, 229 / SUDK, 153.
[124] SKS 11, 229 / SUDK, 153–154, 184.
[125] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 48.
[126] Ibid., p. 47.
[127] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 500–501; Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," p. 128; Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 19–20.
[128] Baugh, "Kierkegaard, the Flâneur of Copenhagen," pp. 113–114.

yet luxurious shopping street and, as Kierkegaard saw it, epitomized the buzzing distraction of the worldly.[129] Kierkegaard consistently calls Copenhagen a "demoralized market town" in his private journals, which came to encapsulate his criticism of its print media, bourgeois-philistine class, and spiritless preachers.[130] Coming under repeated public ridicule for his clothing style and posture in the *Corsair* magazine in 1846, he disdained the threatening power of the Danish *coteries* toward a public individual.[131] While beginning as a predominantly republican publication, *Corsair* focused on the satirical mocking of Danish cultural figures in the 1840s, as its sales became primarily driven by its entertainment value.[132] Avidly writing about this disastrous *Corsair* affair in his journals, Kierkegaard loathed the silence of Danish intellectuals to the rampant press and found his only relief in writing.[133] The scandal had a serious effect on Kierkegaard's view of Denmark and its "degeneracy," influencing both his cultural and social critiques of the amorphous crowd and the despair caused by their obsession with appearance, chatter, and superficiality.[134]

The Tivoli Gardens are emblematic of a new cosmopolitanism sprouting from a medieval Copenhagen, and the popular attention toward this attraction fed into Kierkegaard's conception of despair. The gardens opened in 1843 and boasted tobacconists, patisseries, a daguerreotype studio, picture galleries, and from a religious or political viewpoint, a thoroughly distracted public.[135] The publication *Tivoli-Avis* (1844–1846) educated visitors on how to enjoy the attractions, such as how to properly listen to music, mirroring the style of an instructional text expected for religious or scholarly matters.[136] While Tivoli may be considered an early prototype for the modern marketplace, as free trade laws and night lamps were employed in the walled gardens a decade before their widespread use in Copenhagen, some observers saw the potential drawbacks of this urban project.[137] Johann Ludvig Heiberg commented on the sense of awkwardness expressed by the emerging urban crowd in Copenhagen, as urbane living required a sense of self-discipline and adaptive behavior

[129] Ibid.; Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 9–10, 14.
[130] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 197; SKS, 15 / KJN 6, 11
[131] Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 193–194.
[132] Bertel Nygaard, "Visual Republicanism in Copenhagen: Corsaren During the Early 1840s" (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2022), p. 56.
[133] SKS 21, 350 / KJN 10, 361; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 197.
[134] Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 50.
[135] Martin Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity: Tivoli in Copenhagen," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 20, no. 1 (1997): p. 88.
[136] Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity," p. 86.
[137] Ibid., pp. 88–89.

which the insular Copenhagener struggled with during this transitional period.[138] As Heiberg observed in an 1828 essay, the new coffee houses and streets were noisy, cramped, and social classes were disharmonious.[139] British visitors were impressed by Tivoli, but still critiqued its latency compared to other cities around Europe.[140] This represents a common foreign view of the "backwards Dane" and was possibly fueled by residual animosity after the British naval attack on Copenhagen during the Napoleonic Wars.[141] Swedish writer Frederika Bremer was reminded of the Athenians when visiting Copenhagen with its "treasures and artists, its learned men and their lectures . . . it may well be called the Athens of the North."[142] She also warned the Copenhagener from becoming too headstrong and losing their "good-nature," while also characterizing Kierkegaard's contemporary "philosophy of the heart" as something which must only be popular amongst women—a critique presumably not appreciated by Kierkegaard, based on his negative stance toward feminine despair.[143]

Amongst a panoply of perspectives on the changing city, Kierkegaard considered the inherent harm many of these new intellectual, democratic, and consumerist trends posed to its religious core. An individual can become "too sensate to have the courage to dare be, and endure being, spirit," becoming resolved in their happiness and its "illusory security and peace."[144] Tivoli became a popular and secluded locale for a mixture of social groups to explore foreign forms of conspicuous consumption.[145] Critical of the "rabble-barbarism" of urban entertainment throughout his works, Kierkegaard envisioned his pure "knight of faith" in *Fear and Trembling* as a common city-dweller who could even come to enjoy a trip to the boisterous Deer Park, invincible to worldly excess through their unwavering inner faith.[146] This paradoxical world-affirmation of pure faith complicates Kierkegaard's view of urban life. However, it may still represent

[138] Ibid., pp. 84–85.
[139] Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life*, pp. 8–10.
[140] Ibid., p. 11.
[141] Ibid., p. 8.
[142] Ibid., p. 10; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, p. 213.
[143] Clare Carlisle situates the moment when Kierkegaard reads Bremer's magazine piece in August 1849, which would be a few months after he sent his manuscript of *SUD* to his printer in June 1849. However, Kierkegaard's negative attitude toward "feminine despair" and attention to fashion was an ongoing critique of his, evident in his article in *Copenhagen's Flying Post* during the 1830s, which criticized female emancipation, through to the 1850s when he criticized wives and mothers for an "aggressive egotism." See also Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, p. 590; SKS 11, 164–166 / SUDK, 65–66; Carlisle, *The Philosopher of the Heart*, pp. 115, 123, 237.
[144] SKS 11, 142–143, 158 / SUDK, 34–35, 56.
[145] Zerlang, "Orientalism and Modernity," p. 86.
[146] John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 50; Lippitt and Pattison, *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 53.

an increase in his critical attitude toward modernization in the late 1840s. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus sees a public lavishing in shallow interests without the priority of each person's inner faith. The urban retreat of Tivoli was a dangerous temptation for the despairing self and supplanted one's faith with the bourgeois-philistinism of Copenhagen elite culture.

A culture of immediacy and worldly consumption was seen to restrict deep religious contemplation and exacerbate one's despair through an imbalance toward the finite over the infinite, and the world over spirit. In *The Sickness unto Death*, an imbalance of the temporal aspect over the eternal aspect of the self is one cause for despair, and Anti-Climacus describes the "eternal" as the timeless and final qualifier of one's selfhood before God.[147] Despair, as he suggests, requires a paradoxical acknowledgement of both temporality and eternality by finding a balance of faith in the "the moment" (*Øieblikket*)—as David Lappano describes, "temporality, then, is the place that commands our attention and our activity, but it is the eternal that qualifies such attention and activity."[148] Like the image of a rower, pushing forward blindly each day with their back to eternity, Anti-Climacus finds no compromise in escaping from or denying the world, but instead sees the necessity of faith *within* the world.[149] This idea is similarly developed through Kierkegaard's concept of the "knight of faith," who can pass as a humble man living in a crowded city, resting his faith entirely in God. This is a paradoxical, invisible, and inner "movement" beyond externally visible signs in existence. For Kierkegaard, living a purely external life also results in a deepening of despair, as one believes one's entire self can be based on the dialectical balance of body and psyche, and a mediation of the finite and infinite, through one's own invented ethical framework. In summary, all forms of despair ultimately prevent "self-actualization" of complete faith, and Kierkegaard sees Copenhagen's physical and intellectual modernization as entirely ignorant of the necessary rigor of religious life.[150] Kierkegaard's exemplary "knight of faith" represents the primacy of faith over the world, but still a faithful existence *within* the world. Anti-Climacus attempts to explain this paradoxical idea in *The Sickness unto Death* and, in doing so, provide a manual for Christian upbuilding and a guide for one to live faithfully in urban modernity.[151]

[147] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, pp. 109, 111.
[148] Ibid., pp. 110–111, 124.
[149] Ibid., pp. 110, 123.
[150] Ibid., p. 120.
[151] Michael Theunissen and Helmut Illbruck, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 113.

5. Conclusion

Division is a crucial theme in *The Sickness unto Death* and lies at the core of Kierkegaardian despair. A divided self, split between balanced physical and psychical faculties, is in the constant tension of becoming through Kierkegaard's vision of embracing paradoxical faith in an inconceivable God. *Fortvivelse* and *Verzweiflung*, Danish and German translations of despair respectively, have shared etymological connotations of "double mindedness" and division.[152] Kierkegaard's world was divided between traditional Christian faith, in its uncompromising striving for Biblicism, and the modern influences of historical, democratic, and rationalist philosophies championing humanity's self-produced ethics and reason. These urban changes of the 1840s occurred within a city still outgrowing its medieval heritage. Following a distinctly medieval tradition, the city gates were still being locked every night and the keys delivered to the monarch himself.[153] This static paternalism was rapidly eclipsed by the pressures of a commercial and constitutional democracy. As the first railways opened in Denmark, attention flooded to new Parisian fashions, Østergade and Tivoli teemed with new bourgeois attractions, and city newspapers began to ridicule the town's peculiar thinkers. Kierkegaard viewed these popular trends, along with the populist preachers of the Danish Church who appealed to the same consumptive habits, as deeply harmful to the faith of the Danish people. He found the only salvation for widespread despair in a changing world to be the act of resting one's own self in the *changelessness* of God.[154]

David Lappano writes that "much of *The Sickness unto Death* is a response to what Kierkegaard sees in German Idealism as a philosophy of *self-production in immanence*."[155] I would argue that this notion of self-production is also a common ideological current that Kierkegaard sees throughout the modernization of Copenhagen and political reforms in Denmark: an ability to shape and produce oneself through social identity and secular life. The political and social movements of the mid-nineteenth century were seen to be deeply harmful to one's selfhood and one's faith, causing various forms of despair within every individual and severing the influence of the Church. Whether conscious or unconscious, stemming from weakness or defiance, hidden or explicit, all forms of despair come from an inability of the individual to face the question of conscience, ethics, and faith. Lappano writes, "No public, not even public reason or

[152] Palmer, *Faith in a Hidden God*, p. 248; Barnett, *From Despair to Faith*, p. 125.
[153] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life: Between Romanticism and Modernism: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8.
[154] Carlisle, "Publishing The Sickness unto Death," p. 41.
[155] Lappano, *Kierkegaard's Theology of Encounter*, p. 126 (emphasis added).

law, no class, no national identity, and no race can ask or answer this question on one's behalf," encapsulating the preoccupation of the modern subject with new forms of identity, rationalist faith, and cultural belonging as impinging on true faith and cause for Kierkegaardian despair.

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus offers a deconstructive approach to describing forms of despair in increasing levels of consciousness and intensity.[156] Examples of despair in the text include various misrelations of the finitizing and infinitizing forces within the self: abstract imbalances in oneself between what is necessary and possible, what is temporal and eternal.[157] A coherent selfhood is a *synthesis*, which Michael Theunissen describes: "The synthesis is realized as the unity of these movements . . . 'getting away from' and 'coming back to' itself."[158] This structural view of the self is concluded with Anti-Climacus' requirement of faith, where "the self rests transparently in the power that established it."[159] Kierkegaard was shaped by the various intellectual movements occurring before and around his authorship. He interacted with these ideas by partially appropriating and extending them, while also criticizing and challenging their incompleteness. Luther's understanding of despair and hope, including the need for revelation and an individual relationship with God to develop hope and reach salvation, echoes throughout Kierkegaard's text. His upbringing in Luther's theology predisposed Kierkegaard to critique the ongoing accommodations of the Church around him and develop a more extreme notion of faith.[160] *The Sickness unto Death* stands as Kierkegaard's outcry to Christendom regarding the distractions, accommodations, and delusions drying Christianity of its spirit and leaving the self in unknowing and hopeless despair. Studying Kierkegaard's concept of despair requires a Janus-faced attention toward the modernizing world he was speaking to and the past voices he was drawing from. In adopting such an approach, the tightness of his dialectical philosophy becomes more spacious and vivid, reflecting a tiled mosaic of his personal and historical context.

[156] SKS 11, 115 / SUDK, 1.
[157] Theunissen and Illbruck, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, p. 108.
[158] Ibid.
[159] SKS 11, 242 / SUDK, 131.
[160] Plekon, "Kierkegaard, the Church and Theology of Golden-Age Denmark," pp. 256–257.