

I

From Street to Salon: First Blood

THE WORLD FAMILIAR to resident Europeans in the early nineteenth century differed from the one we know today in ways it is easy to lose sight of. The street names after all remain the same and many of the buildings. But we can easily forget that in Kierkegaard's time in the whole world only Paris, London, and Berlin had populations in excess of one million.¹ Copenhagen was even then, by comparison, a small city of less than 150,000, and Denmark itself, or at least that part of it that had a majority of native Danish-speakers, numbered less than a million.² In the south of Jutland (Jylland) there was a blend of Danish- and German-speakers in Schleswig (Slesvig), and Holstein (Holsten) was entirely German-speaking. These two 'duchies' were to generate acute political problems and turmoil towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

Formerly almost exclusively agrarian in its economy, and with whatever power not invested in the absolute monarch in the hands of landowners, during the eighteenth century Denmark prospered greatly as a trading nation, largely helped by an alliance of 'armed neutrality' with Russia and Sweden, later also with Prussia, offering such a strategically situated maritime state great opportunities. Apart from carrying trade to the belligerents in a time of almost incessant war, Denmark also acquired colonies in India and the West Indies, and although it was the first country to banish slave-trading, that too – from a base in Ghana – was among the many sources of its new prosperity.³ Wealth now came to be concentrated in the cities, and Copenhagen, though small, became a highly prosperous commercial centre. Its architecture still bears the stamp of a period of expansion and wealth that gave a tremendous boost to a city whose name (which translates as 'trading harbour') already betrays its earliest mercantile origins.

The concentration of wealth in a city provides a background for the flourishing of a cultural life independent of commercial interests, and in the first half of the nineteenth century Denmark produced an impressive array of artists, poets, philosophers, and scientists. Among the latter was Hans Christian Ørsted, who in July 1820 issued a four-page announcement in Latin describing the workings of electromagnetism, causing a sensation among European scientists. Technological innovations originating elsewhere, for example the telegraph and the horse-drawn omnibus, and not least the hydraulic press, eventually came in their turn to Denmark. Due to industry's dependence on scientific research, science itself depended to a degree on the continuing success of commercial life. But the collected wealth that allowed an increasingly scientific culture to prosper also generated a level of discussion and debate, worthy of nations with far longer traditions, that permitted that culture to survive commercial disaster and other upheavals. A space was provided in society for the formation of different perspectives upon an uneven course of events typical of unsettled times. Proximity to the German *Länder* as well as the University of Kiel's status as a German-speaking Danish university brought Danish scholars and literati in contact with the latest political, intellectual, and artistic developments in Europe at large. The German connection could even be seen in the Danish infrastructure, where state titles and designations of military ranks were borrowed from neighbours to the south and east. Artists and writers travelled to the south of Italy and even to then-distant Greece, took up residence in Dresden, Paris, and Rome, and knew Europe thoroughly. For the aspiring scholar a visit to the great names abroad was a natural extension to a university education in Copenhagen or Kiel; Danish writers spoke with Goethe, philosophers not only read but met Fichte, Schleiermacher, Schelling, and even Hegel, bringing home with them an enthusiasm born of direct contact with living legends. Nor was the traffic one-way. In the early thirties, in the year before he died, Schleiermacher paid Copenhagen a visit, and several Berlin professors travelled there. Danish philosophers and philosopher-theologians as often as not wrote in German, sometimes with half an eye on a job in Berlin, Tübingen, Jena, or Göttingen. The Norwegian-born *Naturphilosoph* Henrich (also variously Henrik and Heinrich) Steffens (1773–1845), who came under the influence of Fichte, Herder, and particularly Schelling while studying at Kiel, later joined Schlegel in Jena and afterwards became a professor in Berlin.⁴

Economic disaster came in 1807. Napoleon Bonaparte had put an embargo on British trade, closing all ports under French control (including most of Europe's Atlantic coast) to British shipping. Fearing that both France and Britain had an eye on Denmark's serviceable fleet, and with Britain, in response to Napoleon's blockade, now banning trade to and from enemy ports, the king, Frederick VI (at first a fairly liberal-minded monarch, who reigned from 1802 until his death in 1839, and who had agreed even as regent to initiate important peasant reforms) decided to take the part of France. A British naval squadron arrived outside Copenhagen in August 1807 to demand the Danish fleet. The squadron was equipped for the first time in naval history with rocket-fired missiles, under the supervision of their inventor, William Congreve (1772–1828). Rockets by that time had a range of 3,000 yards.⁵ Receiving no definite reply (the king was out of the capital), the British began to bombard Copenhagen on 16 August, and the damage and loss of life were heavy. The city was quickly surrounded and taken, and on 6 September the Danish monarch signed away what was left of his fleet. But that was just the beginning. The attack itself and the damage it caused had been expensive enough, but the continuing alliance with Napoleon proved equally so. The next years saw an increasing inflation that led Denmark's State Bank in January 1813 to declare bankruptcy. It took five years and the establishment of the National Bank to stabilize the economy, and it was not until the early thirties that the country began to show significant signs of recovery.⁶

By that time, however, other things were afoot. In July 1830 there had been another revolution in Paris that had sparked off agitation throughout Europe. The 1830 uprising was provoked by Charles X's Charter of 26 July dissolving the Chamber of Deputies and tightening control of the press and universities, as well as disenfranchizing a majority of the then-electorate. In the end, however, the French king was forced to leave and certain significant reforms were made, for instance a nominated rather than hereditary chamber. By 1835 the European governments that had been exposed to similar uprisings sparked off by the French example had for the most part recovered their balance and were now in a position to parry any really radical demands for constitutional reform.

In Denmark itself there had been no such turmoil, nothing to compare to the uprisings in Italy, the German kingdoms, and Poland, all of them largely unsuccessful, or – and for obvious reasons – to Belgium's

and Greece's successful bids for independence. On the contrary, back in 1814 Denmark had been forced to cede Norway to a union with Sweden. The most visible though only very recent results of the July Revolution were four geographically separated advisory assemblies, or Regional Parliaments. These were composed of appointed representatives of the several classes and professions, and, if only for his own good, Frederick VI had to consult their opinions. All of these assemblies were situated in provincial towns, and the most important was in Roskilde, quite close to Copenhagen, with representatives from Zealand (Sjælland), on which Copenhagen is situated, and the other Danish islands. The diversification and location of these assemblies, also referred to as Estates, were due partly to complicated relations between Denmark and Germany over Schleswig and Holstein, the latter a member also of the German confederation. Separate Estates were established for these two in the town of Schleswig and in Itzehoe. The fourth assembly covered the rest of mainland Denmark, that is to say Jutland, and was in Viborg. The law establishing the Regional Parliaments was promulgated in 1834. Although precipitated by the July Revolution in Paris, the establishment of an assembly for the entirely German-speaking province of Holstein had already been provided for by the terms of the Congress of Vienna of 1815. But it was not until twenty years later that meetings of the Estates were ever held.

The Roskilde Estates assembly, representing an increasingly articulate middle-class constituency and itself influenced by an increasingly eloquent press, was bound to run foul of a somewhat edgy king and his council.⁷ And indeed it was not long before proposals for reform made in the newly founded liberal newspaper *Fædrelandet* (The Fatherland) prompted the king to withdraw the right of judicial appeal from the Press as well as to suspend *Fædrelandet's* editor, the political economist C. N. David, from his university chair. Still worse for the prospect of a free press, David was prosecuted for violation of the press laws. These events led to the founding in March 1835 of the Free Press Society.

The stage is now set for our story. The date is 28 November 1835, the occasion a meeting of the Student Union at the University of Copenhagen. Universities at this time are of course much smaller than we are accustomed to today. They are dedicated mainly to the education of state functionaries (who include priests, or pastors), teachers, lawyers, and doctors. Instead of thousands, students number only a few hundred.

One of them, a twenty-two-year-old, is about to make his debut as a public speaker. Nothing remarkable about that, but the venue is a special one. In a time of government censorship the Student Union provides, though still within limits not too clearly defined, a unique forum for political debate. Founded fifteen years earlier, its premises have also and by default become the city's main news and gossip centre. As a rule the Union's meetings are occasions for literary and philosophical debate or even just for readings. In 1924 a certain Poul Martin Møller had recited to the Union three chapters of his never-to-be-finished novel, *A Danish Student's Tale* (*En dansk students Eventyr*). But political events have now begun to play a larger part, and the premises afford a meeting place where voices raised against and in defence of the established order can be heard. Because of its new-found functions the Union also has close links with newspaper journalism.

The speaker on this occasion was a slight young man with a shock of light brown hair brushed up rather ridiculously in a crest. With his lively but somewhat sarcastic demeanour he was no stranger to either the Union or his audience. But the location was definitely untypical. 'Usually in the company of somebody and constantly on the street or in public places' was how a former student colleague recalled him.⁸ The sight of this peripatetic youth stumbling along half-sideways in eager conversation, sometimes stopping altogether to stress a point, was familiar to all who had come to hear him. But now he was about to stand in front of a public, alone. The young man was Søren Aabye Kierkegaard.

Quite an audience had gathered. According to this same colleague, Johannes Ostermann, then a philology student and senior of the Union, they were looking forward to a debate between Kierkegaard and Ostermann himself. Just two weeks before, Ostermann had defended and applauded the press for its fight against censorship, and the witty young Kierkegaard was known for his disdain of politics. Although eager to see how Ostermann could cope with his junior, they were also curious to see how the well-known street and coffee-shop intellectual himself performed when forced to speak *en face* and to stick to the point for a whole hour.

For it was indeed true that this talk – though following practice, soon to change, talks at the time were papers read before an audience – represented a break in the pattern of Søren's communicational style.

From his early student days in 1831 he had sought contact in conversation, partly perhaps for the human contact, for it wasn't only academics and the learned he liked to pass the time of day with, but also, it seems clear, to exploit his peers as foils for his own thought. These random meetings with friends and acquaintances, on the street or in the Union or cafés, were needed to feed his own typically polemical form of intellect. He needed other minds to sharpen his own, or, just as satisfyingly, to catch the other out or to score a point – perhaps occasionally also for reasons not purely intellectual.

As a senior member of the Student Union, Ostermann understandably had no wish to become the butt of a public display of intellectual virtuosity at the hands of a comparative youngster, especially one known for 'carrying on a witty dialectical game on all fronts'.⁹ Himself 'an eager politician', Ostermann was in any case disinclined to take on someone he 'knew only had a slight interest in the substance of the matter'. So he declined to take part.¹⁰ Perhaps it was so that they could remain friends, since there was no personal animosity between them; the two 'often met at the Student Union or at tearooms and frequently went on from there to take walks around the lakes'.¹¹

What was it that drove Kierkegaard to the lectern? His eagerness to stand there is evident from the fact that even before borrowing Ostermann's manuscript to prepare his response he had told the Union's leadership of his intention to read a paper. Ready explanations would come to his audience coloured by the young Kierkegaard's reputation for intellectual witticism and mockery. Ostermann himself was inclined to put Kierkegaard's eagerness down to plain rivalry: 'the fact that my defence [of the press] was met with sympathy pushed him into the opposite camp, where he allied himself more or less as a matter of indifference'.¹² That might well be it. Kierkegaard might hope for his reply to be even better received, and he knew that Ostermann's manuscript had immediately been sought by *Fædrelandet*, the newly established liberal newspaper.¹³ What better incentive for someone with a growing desire for literary fame than to make a mark in a newspaper belonging to the opposite camp?

Who exactly were this 'opposite camp'? In broad political terms they were the conservative resistance to liberal reform. But conservatism was not at the time, any more than the new radicalism, a single coherent movement or even anything remotely deserving the name 'movement'.

Politically, at least, it was rather the immobility or intransigence of tradition. Conservatism becomes a movement only when reformers become a nuisance enough to spur the authorities and those whose interests lie with them into defensive action. What was mainly causing the Danish establishment unease at the time was an increasingly critical journalism and its effect on the monarchical government. It was when the government took unkindly to a series of newspaper articles calling for liberal reforms that the Free Press Society (or, more correctly, the Society for the Correct Use of the Freedom of the Press) had been founded that March. The society was to become the nucleus of the future Liberal Party. Students were drawn to the cause and to the issues debated in the Union as well as, so far as it dared within the limits of censorship, in the press.

Lack of enthusiasm for reform or downright opposition came as usual from several quarters, and not all of it was focused on the censorship issue. Large property owners would have their special reasons for resisting any undermining of the forms of authority on which their proprietorship depended. Many people with positions in the organs of authority themselves, whether high or low – perhaps even especially low – would know which side their bread was buttered on. And of course among the state officials were the Lutheran clergy, whose livings depended on the established system.

But there was the literary establishment too. Although this did much to colour, and with its publications give voice to, an increasingly erudite and cultured bourgeoisie, it thought of itself as possessing a very special kind of stake in the establishment. At that time, and in the wake of the Romantic movement, artists and literati tended to consider their skills and insights as uniquely qualifying them to be custodians of the human spirit. The great majority of writers were opposed to liberal reform, seeing in the kinds of changes proposed a despiritualization of society, the road to institutionalized philistinism or worse. So while not all estate owners, bureaucrats, or even clergymen may have had scruples about offending the king or have been opposed in principle to the rise of critical journalism, influential men of letters were practically unanimous in their scepticism towards such changes.

Of course, an aspiring writer like Kierkegaard might oppose the reforms simply because his mentors did, since these were the people whose approval he needed if there was to be any chance of becoming

one of their successors. In December of the previous year Kierkegaard had already published a brief article which seemed mainly designed to find favour with the influential coterie around one Johan Ludvig Heiberg and his wife, Johanne Luise Heiberg (née Hanne Pätges), Denmark's outstanding actress. But many would expect the young Kierkegaard, with his well-known literary leanings, to take the side of the conservatives anyway. If some people, like Ostermann, thought him likely to do that simply because someone had defended the opposite view, others might think that this aesthetically inclined young man would, if for nothing else, use the opportunity to distance himself from the squalid political fray now building up inside the walls of the Student Union, and help in that way to restore the balance in favour of art and philosophy, that is to say culture rather than politics.

As it turned out, Kierkegaard's maiden speech offered him his own first real entry into journalism, and it was this that opened for him the doors to Copenhagen's literary coteries.

Kierkegaard undoubtedly did have his mentors. One of them was Poul Martin Møller, whose name we have already heard. But among Copenhagen's cultural leaders there were two he held in especially high regard: Heiberg and Bishop Mynster. The influence of Mynster, perhaps Denmark's most impressive cultural figure at the time, went back to Kierkegaard's childhood and is linked with his relationship to his father, to which we will return. But it was Heiberg who dominated the *literary* scene. Even a writer who had misgivings about the salons and their predominantly conservative influence would hope to win Heiberg's professional approval, for Heiberg also edited and owned the most influential literary and philosophical journals.

Both before and after he had access to those coteries, Kierkegaard does appear privately to have despised them. He had recently penned his misgivings about the salon system in a now-famous diary dated the summer previous to the talk in the Union. The diary suggests that the young Kierkegaard had a darker and deeper side that he was unwilling or simply unable to reveal to his contemporaries. In a vein that owes much to the influences of his father and Mynster, he writes in the diary of the need to 'fence his individuality about' and to avoid the 'spiritual laziness' of those who 'live on the crumbs that fall from other people's tables'.¹⁴ The style of the diary, however, whatever the source of the sentiments, is that of an aspiring writer self-consciously flexing his

literary muscles, perhaps in the hope of eventually winning the plaudits of a Heiberg.

How did the talk go? Ostermann recalled that it was ‘rather heavy going’ but nevertheless ‘bore the hallmark of [Kierkegaard’s] unique intellectual talents’. It was also received ‘with great applause’.¹⁵

What were they applauding? Or, perhaps the first question, who applauded? Were they, conservatives and liberals alike, simply appreciating the anticipated display of wit and erudition? Since, as Ostermann himself points out, only a few trend-setters in the Union at the time ‘were seized by the idea’,¹⁶ that is to say, the liberal constitutional ideal, was the applause perhaps that of a predominantly conservative majority that felt itself vindicated by Kierkegaard’s display on its behalf?

Whatever the case, many who thought Kierkegaard an effete intellectual and aesthete must have been surprised at how down-to-earth his text was. Indeed, it appeared that its main purpose was to bring certain facts to light, facts about the recent journalistic past, facts which indicated how misleading Ostermann’s optimistic claims for the liberal press had been a fortnight earlier. This aesthete had done his home-work. He also seems to have had an ‘idea’ of his own, about facing the facts and not obscuring them by putting them in a false light. Indeed, bringing facts to light, or rather bringing light to the facts, provides both the talk’s opening motif and its title: ‘Our Journal Literature: A Study of Nature in the Light of Midday.’¹⁷

The ideals politicians oppose to the established order are, he says, unreal because untried. Not only that, they are also treated as though they were growth points whose unquestioned assistance to progress can be prevented only by external factors, including tradition itself, or complacency. So instead of waiting to see how a new idea actually works, one ‘dwells on its first entrance on the world-scene . . . [and] wants people from East and West to come and worship it in its swaddling clothes’. Further anticipating a later habit of scriptural allusion, he says there is wishful thinking in this, a factual grain of mustard seed being made into a ‘mighty tree’.¹⁸ It’s the same, he says, as the way in which early morning light is preferred by landscape painters because at that time the play of light and shadow picks out nothing in particular and thereby imparts an ‘especially favourable overall impression’.¹⁹ To see the facts for what they are, you need to expose them to the light of noon.

In a climate of opinion which sees everything moving inexorably forward Kierkegaard thinks it would be salutary for each person to stop 'the wheel of evolution' long enough to see how much progress has really been made, and to look for any 'grit or whatever' that may have got into the machinery to make it less than we suppose.²⁰ Two aspects of liberal politics in particular he finds particularly misleading. One is the illusory picture generated by a single party name, since it conceals all the 'innumerable nuances' of opinion really guiding the 'rather hectic' reform effort.²¹ And it was of course true in Denmark as elsewhere that the liberal movement, just like the gradually coalescing conservative opposition, embraced a variety of positions. There is also a comment on the unhealthy nature of party programmes: 'rather than a natural and healthy life, [such] ready-made confessions signal one of life's final stages.'²²

There follows a historical 'recapitulation' of the liberal press's recent activity, Kierkegaard acknowledging in the margin of the manuscript that this was partly written before he received Ostermann's manuscript, as if he had been looking for this opportunity to speak up on the subject.²³ It begins by criticizing Ostermann for identifying the founding of a newspaper in 1831 as the opening of the current campaign. Kierkegaard says this paper did not actually oppose the status quo but was 'on the whole satisfied with the existing constitution'. All that it did was to 'censure alleged illegal conduct on the part of individual state functionaries'. He could recall finding 'in [no] single paper of that kind an attack on any significant organ of the body of state, on the system itself rather than its abuse by some concrete individual'.²⁴ As for liberal journalism proper, that was of a more recent origin and due to several factors to which Kierkegaard now proceeds to draw his audience's attention, foremost among them the continuing influence of the July Revolution of 1830 in Paris. Comparing it to the bloody events of 1789, Kierkegaard calls it 'a successful operation carried out by an experienced surgeon'.²⁵ Such recent facts were of course too familiar to his audience for Kierkegaard to have to detail them. But it is interesting for us that the 1834 law establishing the Regional Parliaments both was prompted in part by the precedent of the July Revolution and also set in motion the political events which provided the context for Kierkegaard's talk.

According to Kierkegaard, Ostermann had presented the immediate events that led to the founding of the Free Press Society in a way that