

# Cultural Crisis and Golden Age as Dialectic Opposites: A Review of *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard*

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**Abstract** The first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century is commonly thought to be the Danish Golden Age with its cultural blossom and success in spheres of art, science, literature and philosophy. In *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard*, however, Jon Stewart provides a reflection on this age through its very opposite, the haunting crisis in Danish cultural life. Stewart argues that the diagnosis of the crisis and the struggle to provide solutions by Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard are one of the shaping forces of the cultural ferment. The common apprehension of the crisis grounds the affinity among Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard, despite of their apparent divergence in philosophical concerns. The affinity, Stewart argues, lies in the mode of Hegelian speculative thinking they all adopt in their diagnoses and solutions of the crisis. From the logic behind Stewart's argument, cultural crisis and cultural golden age thus grow up as two opposites with the mediating dynamic between them. The significant implication of Heiberg's speculative poetry, Martensen's speculative theology and Kierkegaard's controlled irony, Stewart argues, for our age with increasing encounter with differences and diversities, lies in their view of individual things not as separate from one another, but as in interdependence based on their dialectical relations of identity and difference.

**Key words** Danish Golden Age; cultural crisis; *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard*; philosophy

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and ethical literary criticism.

The Danish Golden Age is commonly accepted as the cultural surge in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term “Golden Age” is a posterior designation given by the Danish philosopher Valdemar Vedel in 1890 and it soon enters into currency. This age produces figures with both national and international fame in fields of literature, philosophy, science and visual art: Adam Oehlenschläger, J. L. Heiberg, B.S.Ingemann, N. F. S. Grundtvig, H.C.Andersen, H.C.Ørsted, Bertel Thorvaldsen, and Søren Kierkegaard are among the leading ones on the list. In striking contrast, 19<sup>th</sup> century also witnesses Denmark’s traumatic experience with its concomitant marginalization in Europe: Denmark got severely losses in its alliance with Napoleon when Copenhagen got bombed by the British in 1807, it went national bankruptcy, lost Norway in 1814, traumatized in the Schleswig-Holstein War and then in 1860 lost the Schleswig-Holstein area in the war with Prussia and lost about 40% of its land area. The striking contrast has a lot of scholars analyze the causality between the cultural prosperity and the national crisis. Jon Stewart’s *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard* is one of the latest contribution to this scholarship. While the Golden Age is commonly viewed as a result of cultural response to the national and patriotic movements in a larger social landscape, Stewart contributes a new perspective by arguing that the Golden Age is actualized in the philosophical diagnosis of its cultural confusions and the struggle to provide solutions.

Stewart uses Quellenforschung (source-work methodology) to construct connection between Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard, whose discussions and solutions to the cultural crisis are, Stewart argues, formative to the Danish Golden Age. Heiberg is the one who makes a public announcement of the crisis of relativism and nihilism and the one who “has gone down in Danish history as the city’s first smagsdommer or smagstyran(judge or tyrant )of taste” (Oxfeldt 77) as the chief director of the Royal Theater and editor of influential journals. So Stewart’s choice of Heiberg will make a strong case of his argument. The source-work methodology, Stewart claims, detects the textual connection in the polemic dialogues among Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard, demonstrating that they share the Hegelian mode of speculative thinking in their various solutions to the crisis.

After justification of his methodology in the first chapter, Stewart contributes ten chapters in case study to address the crisis from different aspects. As a case study, Stewart analyzes important works from Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard: Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*,

*Fata Morgana* and *New Poem*; Martensen's "Observation on the Idea of Faust with Reference to Lenau's *Faust*" and his review of Heiberg's works, and Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/or*. The organization of these analysis follows the triad of religion, history and art. For Heiberg is more of a literati than a philosopher, literature becomes a major topic as a specific kind of art. As a Hegelian apologist, Heiberg believes that confusions in these three aspects are the very problems of his day and Hegel's speculative philosophy is the solution to them. It is his adaption of Hegel's philosophy to the Denmark stage that engages his contemporaries into critical communication on the crisis of the day. Martensen and Kierkegaard are among the most actively involved and contribute their polemic views from the other two aspects of the triad in theology and philosophy respectively. Stewart's analysis of these passages reveals the intertextual dialogue between these authors and he holds that these discussions are formative to the Danish Golden Age.

Stewart starts his argument with Heiberg's treatise on the relation between religion and philosophy. The urgency to restore religion in an encompassing philosophical system lies, as Stewart tries to prove, in Heiberg's diagnosis of his contemporaries' lost of faith and wallowing in the ephemeral phenomena. Stewart argues that for Heiberg the crisis is caused by the Enlightenment's denial of reason in religion. Making religion irrational, people no longer believe in it, and the void of belief spawns relativism and nihilism. Thus Heiberg introduces Hegel's unification of religion with philosophy as a way to reintroduce it into the rational sphere. Hegel uses the term Spirit (*Geist*) to capture the dual perspectives of religion: on the one hand, it includes the contingency of concrete religions and Gods people believe in which must develop on its own term, and on the other, it is the abstract whole; different people with their concrete religious beliefs are taken as humanity in general with a single religion leading up to the whole, the *Geist* or Spirit. Stewart holds it is Heiberg's conviction that to solve the religious crisis is to grasp the contingent and abstract perspectives in Hegel's way and thus to reintroduce truth of religion not in traditional forms of worship, but in an analysis of the abstract concept of *Geist*.

Kierkegaard accepts Heiberg's diagnosis of the cause of crisis, but, Stewart argues, he addresses this problem in a different way. He emphasizes the importance to accept the irrational aspects of religion. Kierkegaard insists on the impossibility to unite religion within the rational sphere of philosophy, since there is no way philosophy can explain the truth behind religion. In this comparison, Stewart makes a sharp observation saying that "where Heiberg located the crisis in the cultural sphere in general, Kierkegaard shifted it to the inwardness of each individual. For Kierkegaard, the struggle for faith is not something that takes place at the level of

society in general but rather in each person individually” (170). In other words, to Kierkegaard, the individual religions must be accepted with their irrational dimension without the coercion of philosophical system to rationalize them, the very opposite to what Heiberg claims.

It seems that Stewart is rather abstract about how skepticism against religion rises from the Golden Age. If he can include in his landscape the “anti-semitism” (Rossel, ed. *A History of Danish Literature* 207) and the nationalism movement exclusive of the non-Christianity at the time, the underlying orientation in the critical dialogues between Heiberg and Kierkegaard will emerge. Philosophical explanation of religion is what they resort to for a possibility of co-existence or unification of concrete different religions. Heiberg and Kierkegaard diverges in their solutions with the former emphasizes on the unity in concept while the latter on individual choices and acceptances of differences.

For the philosophical comprehension of history, Stewart argues that there exists Hegel’s influence in Kierkegaard’s concept of irony. This influence can be detected in their common understanding of history as a mediation between abstract concepts and particular phenomena. Stewart first makes an introduction to Hegel’s three categories of history: the original, the reflective, and the philosophical. He focuses on the role of thought in Hegelian speculative history, arguing that for Hegel there is no purported raw material of historical events because forms of thoughts are always involved in organization and construction of those materials. Therefore thought is not imposed on the preexisting empirical reality, but rather historical reality itself has rationality inherent in. And this is, Stewart tries to prove, where Hegel and Kierkegaard meet. Hegel’s philosophy operates on the abstract concept while Kierkegaard’s on the actuality of phenomenon and existence. But as to the explanation of history, Stewart argues that Kierkegaard and Hegel reach agreement as to the mediation between the particular and the universal, the empirical and the abstract. Stewart claims it is reasonable to think that Kierkegaard in his introduction to *The Concept of Irony* is a laud to Hegel, not that Kierkegaard embraces the Hegelian abstract as counter-intuitive, but that he traces Hegel’s emphasis on the actuality in phenomena in his theory on the thought-involved reality. Stewart makes a strong case of viewing Hegel’s speculative philosophy and Kierkegaard’s existentialism, which are commonly accepted as in contrast with each other, in a new perspective of influence and reception.

Kierkegaard’s concept of controlled irony in a polemic dialogue with Heiberg’s speculative poetry is, according to Stewart, informative to the crisis in the field of art, in Romantic literature to be more specific. Stewart holds that if Kierkegaard’s enigmatic concept of controlled irony is set in conjunction with

Heiberg's poetics on speculative poetry, then their common diagnosis of the crisis caused by Romantic irony will come to the fore. Heiberg's speculative poetry, a literary appropriation of Hegel's speculative philosophy, and Kierkegaard's controlled irony share in common their emphasis on the mediation between the actuality and the abstract concept, but with difference in their emphasis. Hegel puts philosophy at the top and adopts a mediation between opposites as a way of being united in the Concept; Heiberg introduces speculative poetry alongside with history, art and religion, maintaining that poets must be a speculative philosopher to grasp the essence and truth behind phenomena, and not fall victim to the contingent feelings and emotions as the Romantic poets do. Kierkegaard argues that controlled irony is the solution to Romantic skepticism for it is "the bath of regeneration and rejuvenation, irony's baptism of purification that rescues the soul from having its life in finitude" (quote in Stewart 211). Stewart's explanation implies that irony to Kierkegaard is what mediation to Hegel and Heiberg. What Kierkegaard sees as the problem of the Romantics is that they are stuck in irony — or opposites in Heiberg's terms — and take it as the end. And this problem can only be solved by controlled irony. That is to treat irony not as the end but as means to the end, to the truth. Only in this way, nihilism and skepticism developed from Romantic irony can be avoided. While focuses on the actuality and importance of phenomenon, Kierkegaard introduces Hegel's dynamic movement of the mediation as a way to evolve out of trammels of irony to a higher truth. Thus in Stewart's view, Heiberg's diagnosis of the crisis of the age is formative to Kierkegaard's assessment of the problem of Romantic irony, and Heiberg's speculative poetry is thus the forerunner for Kierkegaard's controlled irony, both are at the Hegelian stage of reflection after the stage of immediacy and need to move to the further stage of speculation.

Given the affinity established between Heiberg's speculative poetry and Kierkegaard's controlled irony, Kierkegaard's enigmatic reference to Martensen in his *The Concept of Irony*, Stewart argues, should not be viewed as his mocking criticism of the latter, which is the common perception of this reference, but rather as meant "in earnest" (216). Obviously, from the review of Heiberg's *New Poems* grows out Martensen's affinity with Kierkegaard. Martensen's analysis of Heibergian comic contraction, according to Stewart, echoes Kierkegaard's controlled irony. It seems that the logic behind is the common ground already established between Heiberg and Kierkegaard. It is quite natural that Martensen's approval review of *New Poems* implies his connection with Kierkegaard.

Considering the title of this book with a concern of "cultural crisis of the Golden Age" and all the discussion on the balance between concrete historical phenomena and abstract concept, it is a pity that concrete materials of Denmark's

Golden Age crisis is left out of the discussion and simply get generalized with the abstract concept such as relativism, nihilism and skepticism. Nonetheless, Jon Stewart's *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard* contributes a new perspective to the scholarship on Danish Golden Age. By arguing that the Golden Age is actualized in the philosophical diagnosis of its cultural and religious confusions and in the struggle to provide solutions, Stewart puts cultural golden age and cultural crisis in a mediating relation. And the mediation of opposites is what Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard emphasize for it embraces individuals and differences in a dependent relation, and this embrace of differences is a determining force in shaping the Danish Golden Age.

### Note

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