

# TUNING IN



ON THE THIRD TUESDAY IN APRIL 1851, SØREN KIERKEGAARD MOVES OUTSIDE Copenhagen's old ramparts and establishes himself on the first floor in a newly built villa toward the end of Sortedammsøen (Sortedam Lake). His residence is in an almost country setting, surrounded by pleasant private gardens and large commercial market gardens that are spacious and pleasant. From his dayrooms he can follow the comings and goings along the path beside Sortedam Lake, one of the three narrow lakes which once were part of the city's fortifications facing the land, but which already in Kierkegaard's time had become mainly decorative. The two other lakes, Peblingsøen and St. Jørgens Sø, from which generations of citizens have drawn their drinking water, served the same peaceful purpose.

On his regular excursions into and out of Copenhagen Kierkegaard often happens to encounter his former fiancée Regine. Since the 12th of October 1841, when, with much drama and in full view of the public eye, their engagement was broken off, he had exchanged not a single word with her. The break-up almost cost both of them their lives, but they withstood the horrors; each found a new foothold and, much the richer in experience, was able to start over again: Kierkegaard became author of one of history's most profuse, remarkable, and unbridled bodies of writing, while on the 28th of August 1843, Regine became engaged to departmental head Johan Frederik Schlegel, known as Fritz, whom she married on the 3rd of November 1847, in the Church of Our Savior at Christianshavn.

This might well have meant that Regine's relationship to her former fiancé was a closed chapter. But that is just what it was not. These two people, Søren and Regine, proved enigmatically bound to each other and therefore they had to find pretexts and opportunities to meet as often as possible, preferably so as to make it look as if they were meeting quite by chance. Their encounters by the lakes are always wordless but, maybe for that very reason, exceptionally intense and finely chiseled in an erotic register that the two of them play through in the electric moments at their disposal as they pass by each other. A kind of innocent infidelity unfolds according to strict rules that border at times on ritual. Kierkegaard portrays the meetings with a degree of detail that comes close to being painful; he fixes the time, the distance, the variations of route, wind direction, the weather in general. It is as if he would ensure that the meetings be

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1. “Uncle Søren has also moved half-out into the open country,” Carl Lund could inform Peter Christian Kierkegaard in a letter dated May the 20th 1851. “He has taken up residence here in a large new place on the second floor with access to, and a view over, a lovely garden and the lake.” The photograph has preserved for posterity the stately villa on a summer day, when some of its occupants have settled in the garden that stretched to the east as far as the eye could see from the garden-room terrace. That is not, however, Kierkegaard who is looking out from the open second-floor window under one of the awnings, but it was in this apartment with its six rooms that he lived from April 1851 until October 1852. The villa was torn down in 1897 to give way to the twin buildings with corner towers and copper-sheathed spires that now form the entrance to Willemoesgade.

each time repeated so that the two silent figures should, in all eternity, walk slowly and soundlessly toward each other on the same narrow lane along the lake—and then disappear, each in their own direction, without looking back.

The silence helps to sustain the relationship and renew its aura. It is as if, by not saying anything, Regine lets their youthful love remain untouched by time; the wordlessness acts as a shield against everyday badgering, the endless trifles, all those accounts we humans constantly keep with one another, everything that so often drains the passion, the devotion, and the pride from a marriage. Regine comes to meet her Søren as the one she is, but perhaps even more so as the one she was, the only one he really loved. If the fact that she is married to another could be bracketed just for a careless moment, then, in that meeting’s very fragile seconds, everything is in a way altogether unchanged.

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It is only when Regine is out of Kierkegaard's sight that she reverts to being Mrs. Schlegel.

That the two formerly betrothed meet each other on a path that is rather pointedly called Marriage Path is an irony that Kierkegaard should be the first to remark and interpret as a moral reminder; but the thoughts of the Magister, whose dissertation was on that very topic, have evidently been quite elsewhere. And when looking through his journals from these years, one may with some amazement substantiate just *how* frequent these meetings with Regine have been. For instance, in an entry from January 1850, Kierkegaard writes that he and Regine have for over a month “seen each other almost every blessed day, or at least twice every other day.”<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard's entries from this time have the character of plain and at times almost raw reporting, something that scotches the suspicion of fictionalizing that can inescapably intrude in other contexts. “During the latter part of 1851 she encountered me every day,” Kierkegaard reports in May 1852. “It was during the period when I would walk home by way of Langelinie at ten o'clock in the morning. The timing was exact and the place merely shifted farther and farther up the road to the limekiln. She came walking as if from the limekiln. . . . That was how it went, day after day.”<sup>2</sup> One cannot help noting the altogether non-accidental nature of these meetings, the punctuality and precision, even the synchronizing, with the point of encounter shifting as if to divert attention away from it—as much for the bashful lovers themselves as for outsiders.

Little by little, Kierkegaard has become “so frightfully well known” that these meetings with a “lady,” who “walks that route alone” out of town in the early morning hours, might be read as rather striking and cause gossip. He has noticed that another couple—also meeting regularly and who “knew us both”—have begun to pay just a little too much attention. What departmental head Schlegel might think if he finds out that his lawfully wedded wife is up and dressed and out walking so early seems to bother Kierkegaard less; but he has noticed, all the same, that these rendezvous have long since lost their innocence and cannot with the least probability be put down to the open account of chance: “So I had to make a change,” he writes in his journal. The first day in the New Year he chooses another route, almost as a New Year's resolution.

This resolution was kept. On January 1, 1852, my route was changed; I went home by way of Nørreport.

Some time passed in this fashion, and we did not see each other. One morning she encountered me on the path by the lake, where I was now in the habit of walking. The next day I also took this path, which was my usual one. She was not there. As a precaution, however, I

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2. Østerbro had, at the time, an almost rural character and, with its nursery and kitchen gardens, formed a peaceful contrast to the hectic bustle inside the ramparts. Above the dense treetops can be seen the windmill at Kastellet, and at the point where Østerbrogade turns sharply to the left one finds the gateway into Holmen's churchyard. Reflected in Sortedam Lake's calm water, the trees on the right border the path on which Søren and Regine frequently met one another at a certain period.

nonetheless changed my future route and went down Farimagsgade, and finally I varied my homeward route.

Varying the route home seems to have worked for while—

But what happened? Some time had passed. Then she meets me one morning at 8 o'clock on the avenue outside Østerport, the route I walk to Copenhagen every morning.

The next day she was not there, however. I continued walking to town by this same route, which I cannot very well alter. So she met me here quite often, sometimes also on the ramparts, the path I take to town. Perhaps it was coincidence, perhaps. I could not understand what she was doing on that route at that hour there, but as I notice everything, I noticed that she came that way especially if there was an east wind. So indeed, it could be because she could not bear the east wind on Langelinie. But—she did also come when there was a west wind.

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Regine remains a riddle, she comes walking like a goddess out of nothing, turns up in places it seems by chance—though hardly so, fails to show up, appears once again and chooses wind directions that bring confusion to the philosopher's conclusions.

On his birthday Kierkegaard usually travels to North Zealand for the day, spending the night at a guesthouse there before returning to the city. But when, on May the 5th 1852, he turned thirty-nine, he felt slightly ill and stayed at home.

Then came my birthday. As a rule, I am always away on my birthday, but I was not feeling quite well. So I stayed at home; as usual, I walked into town to talk with the doctor because I had considered celebrating my birthday with something new, something I had never tasted before, castor oil. Right outside my door, on the sidewalk in front of the avenue, she meets me. As so often happens of late, I cannot keep from smiling when I see her—ah, how much she has come to mean to me!—she smiled in return and nodded. I took a step past her, then raised my hat and walked on.

Reading these lines can also cause a smile; one can imagine it, the birthday genius with the sluggish stomach, smiling at his beloved muse who returns the smile. A step forward, the hat doffed, then off and away.

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The reason why these meetings were so poignant is not only the deep, unresolved feelings that bind these two persons together in spite of time, speech, and morals. It is due also to Regine being indissolubly linked to Kierkegaard's authorship, for which she became in his eyes the external, historical occasion. Her absolutely special status in the authorship appears already in the preface to the *Two Edifying Discourses* of 1843. Here Kierkegaard envisages how this little book will wander thoughtfully out into the world and perhaps have the good luck suddenly to meet "that single individual, who with joy and gratitude I call *my* reader, that single individual it is seeking, to whom, so to speak, it stretches out its arms, that single individual who is favorably enough disposed to allow themselves to be found."<sup>3</sup> As the authorship developed, this appeal to the single individual acquired an almost programmatic character; "that single individual" became Kierkegaard's *trademark*. Yet, originally, "that single individual" was Regine; it was to her the edifying discourse stretched out its arms. "The preface to the *Two Edifying Discourses* was intended for her," admits Kierkegaard much later in his journal, and he adds that there "are faint hints in the book itself" regarding Regine.<sup>4</sup> What hints, and where they are to be found is not known, but that Regine has in fact read the book is evident from a conversation Kierkegaard

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had with Professor F. C. Sibbern, who has it from Regine herself. As a text for the second of these edifying discourses Kierkegaard had used James, chapter 1, verses 17–22, which was among his favorite New Testament passages. The title of the discourse is from verse 17 and reads: “All good things and all perfect gifts come from above.” Without entering further into it, Kierkegaard later explains that “the first religious impression she has of me”<sup>5</sup> is connected with these very words, which have consequently a quite special significance for the two formerly betrothed.

On Sunday the 9th of May 1852—that is, just four days after Regine returned the birthday celebrant’s smile, something happens that against all this background is totally bizarre: Kierkegaard is at morning service in Christianborg’s Royal Chapel, where the king’s chaplain, Just Paulli, preaches. Regine is also there and sitting quite near where Kierkegaard is standing. According to the *Ordained Altar-Book* for Denmark, the gospel for this Sunday is a text from the Gospel of St. John, but instead Paulli has chosen to preach on the text from the epistle with precisely the words that meant so much to Kierkegaard and Regine. Nor is Paulli far into the epistle’s text before Regine turns and, “concealed by the person next to her,” looks in the direction of Kierkegaard, who notes that she does so “very fervently,” but otherwise quite consciously refrains from returning her glance. “I looked straight ahead, at nothing in particular,” he explains, although this show of indifference required considerable effort:

I confess that I, too, was somewhat shaken. Paulli finished reading the text aloud. She sank rather than sat down, so that actually I was a bit worried, as I was once before, for her emotion is so vehement.

It was to be even more shattering. For as Paulli introduces his sermon, he says to the congregation that the words of the text are “implanted in our hearts”; yes, he continues, if these words “should be torn from your heart, would not life lose all its worth for you?” Precisely because the words from James’s epistle have become a symbolic sealing of the unbreakable tie between Søren and Regine, Paulli’s construal of the text sounds like a direct commentary on their loving relationship, which is rooted so deeply within their hearts that life without it would have no meaning.

On looking back at these happenings it seems to Kierkegaard “inexplicable” that Paulli should have come up with that introduction to his sermon. It occurs to him that it may have been “meant” for Regine, but he feels convinced that the whole occasion had, in any case, made an enormous impression on her: “It must have been overwhelming for her. I have never exchanged a word with her, have gone my way, not hers—but here it was as though a higher power said to her what I have been unable to say.”

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It was almost like an improvised wedding ceremony, delightfully terrifying. Kierkegaard felt the very earth burning beneath him: "It was as if I were standing on glowing coals."

When "several mornings later" he again encountered Regine somewhere in the town, the tense, the spiritual eroticism that united them in the church seemed far less or as though altogether gone, so that even if Kierkegaard sensed that Regine was expecting a greeting, he refrained from giving one. It was clear to him that, in spite of all corporeal chastity, his relationship to another man's wife does in fact overstep the bounds of all decency and can only continue if Schlegel declares his acquiescence; in short, Schlegel must become the relationship's "middle term":

I am willing to do everything, but if anything is to be done, I must have her husband in the middle. Either—Or! If I am to involve myself with her, then it must be on the grandest scale, then I want it to be known to everyone, to have her transformed into a triumphant figure who will get the most complete restitution for the stigma of my having broken with her.

Kierkegaard should have known himself well enough to realize how difficult it would be to turn these categorical remarks into reality. Besides, as will appear, he had some years earlier, in a written request to Schlegel, made an attempt to come together with Regine under more orderly circumstances. Schlegel, however, proved altogether disinclined to accede to the request, which he interpreted as an out-of-line interference in his married life, and he let Kierkegaard understand this in a letter that was in effect one big and unambiguous "no."

Although hopes of gaining Schlegel's approval of the connection were dashed, Søren and Regine continued to meet, at times daily, sometimes less often. That is how altogether simple and yet terribly complicated it had become. Regine had actually become "that single individual," who, as it goes in that preface to the edifying discourses, has shown herself to be "favorably enough disposed to allow [her]self to be found," whether in one of Copenhagen's churches or out behind the ramparts, or at one or another of those sites lovers are always so anxious to call altogether "fortuitous," precisely because that is what they are not.

Friday the 10th of September 1852 was to be a quite special day, marked by the erotic rituals of silence that had evolved between them:

So today it is twelve years since I became engaged.

Naturally "she" didn't fail to be on the spot and meet me; and although in the summer I take my walk earlier than usual . . . she met me both today and yesterday morning on the avenues by Østerport.

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When they had met the day before and were about to exchange glances, “she suddenly glanced away,” for Regine had seen a horseman approaching behind Kierkegaard, who proved to have come to inform him that his brother-in-law further along the path wanted to speak with him. Fortunately the meeting on that twelfth anniversary was much more successful, even if it, too, was a trifle unresolved:

So today she looked at me; but she didn't nod a greeting, nor speak to me. Ah, perhaps she had expected I would do so. My God, how much I'd like to do that and everything for her. But I don't dare take on the responsibility; she must insist on it herself.

However, I had so much wanted it this year; and it is trying to be on the point of doing something year after year.<sup>6</sup>

A good month later, on the third Tuesday in October 1852, Kierkegaard moves from his villa apartment at Østerbro back to the city, where he rents a smaller apartment from Catharine Christiane Borries, a widow, at 5–6 Klædeboderne (now 38 Skindergade and 5 Dyrkøb), and in doing so acquires as his new imposing neighbor the Church of Our Lady. The move means changes in his daily routes and rhythms, but it is not long before Regine readjusts. Usually they meet on Christmas day in the Church of Our Lady, where Bishop Mynster preaches at Evensong. The same happens this year but with a change in routine because, on Kierkegaard's entering the church, Regine is standing as if waiting for him—or as if expecting someone else? At that moment Kierkegaard is quite unable to size up the situation and has to report it later in detail in his journal.

She didn't come walking, she was standing, obviously waiting for someone whoever that was. There was no one else there. I looked at her. She then went off toward the side door through which I was about to pass. There was something odd about that meeting, so personal. As she passed by me and turned into the door, I made a movement with my body that might have been simply to make room but also a half-greeting. She turned quickly and made a movement. [in the margin:] But now she had no more opportunity had she wanted to speak, for I was already standing in the church. I looked for my usual place; but it didn't escape me that, although she sat a long way off, she kept searching me with her eyes.<sup>7</sup>

These lines bear witness to a remarkable pantomime. The detailed choreography of the bodies' interactions, rendered in a kind of slow motion; the anxiety in case a single step be given a wrong interpretation; the awkwardness and ineptness of Kierkegaard's gestures, the repressed spontaneity—all of this imparts a painful realism to the performance in the church's porch. But it also exposes

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3. With a delicate blend of light and shade over her open face, and with a lace collar held together with a sturdy brooch, Regine gazes dreamily into the photographer's lens. The year, not given, is probably 1855, and its occasion the approaching West Indian exile. The woman in the picture is the one who rushed out on the very day of departure to look for Kierkegaard somewhere in Copenhagen and, in the midst of the throng of people, blessed him after fourteen years of silence.

the fearful fascination that Regine radiates: impregnable yet so intimate, ethereal yet so impassioned, officially another's yet really his.

On Saturday the 17th of March 1855, fourteen years of silence are broken. Departmental Chief Johan Frederik Schlegel has been appointed governor of the Danish West Indies for a five-year term. On the very day of their departure Regine in all haste leaves her apartment in Nybrogade and ventures out into town in the hope of meeting her old love. And, as though the final gesture of a generous Providence toward these two persons whose life histories are so uncontrollably linked, it is not long before her eyes fasten on the familiar figure with the broad-brimmed hat. As she passes him by, she says under her breath: "God bless you—may all go well with you!"<sup>8</sup>

For just an instant that Saturday meeting in a random Copenhagen street turned everything upside down. Regine's blessing succeeded in rendering speechless a

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man never otherwise at a loss for the right words and made him stand still in a more or less symbolic posture, hat in hand. Kierkegaard was here exposed to a situation of the kind one might describe with antiquated words like “dispensation” and “visited upon,” words with which one fumbles to articulate the sense that the most potent things in life always come from the other, they are not at one’s own beck and call or in one’s own power to effect. What went through the master-thinker theologian’s mind in that moment of blessing, no one knows. Perhaps, just for once, there was no thought in his mind at all, simply acceptance of this blessing from the woman in his life.

Nor does one know what went on in Regine’s mind, though she was no doubt anxious to get back quickly to the empty apartment in Nybrogade and to try to appear as unconcerned as possible.

A few hours later she began to put the city behind her.