

Reviews

LASSE HORNE KJÆLDGAARD:

Sjælen efter Døden. Guldalderens moderne gennembrud

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Hidden beneath the glossy image of the Danish Golden Age as a period of harmony and unsurpassed artistic production, we find cracks of social distress, political discontent and economic hardship. But, as Lasse Horne Kjældgaard shows in his superbly written book, *Sjælen efter Døden. Guldalderens moderne gennembrud*, we also find tensions in religious beliefs and theological thinking that had direct bearing on the understanding of art and aesthetic experience. He demonstrates how, ironically, the very period that we retrospectively see as 'golden', was marked by anxiety about the very future and survival of art.

Kjældgaard starts in late 1841, where the young theology student Hans Brøchner created a sensation when he (with Hegel in one hand and youthful defiance in the other) challenged his professors at Copenhagen University by submitting a thesis in which he argued that truth was better understood in philosophical than in religious terms. Punishment was swift. Brøchner did not receive his degree, and soon shifted his field of study. In time he became professor of philosophy and Georg Brandes' teacher, a connection which in part allows for Kjældgaard's thought-provoking subtitle: *The Modern Breakthrough of the Golden Age*.

The seed for the discord can be found in the wake of G.W. F. Hegel's death and in the split between the so-called left Hegelians and right Hegelians. The left Hegelians (like young Brøchner) focused on the importance of history for the understanding of humanity and questioned or rejected the dogma of the immortality of the soul, while the right Hegelians insisted on transcendental divinity and belief in immortality of the individual soul. As a result, the concept of immortality of the soul, Kjældgaard argues, underwent a semantic implosion so that it no longer referred exclusively to a theological or religious question, but was tested in relation to the nature and meaning of art and aesthetic experience. To be more precise, art was seen and discussed as an *anticipation* of the hereafter. This in turn meant that loss of faith in the immortality of the soul had direct consequences for the future of art. If immortality of the

soul was in peril, so was art.

In Denmark, particularly from 1833 to 1849, Poul Martin Møller, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, Hans Lassen Martensen and Søren Kierkegaard all took the pulse and temperature of 'the present time'. Kjældgaard illustrates how the four competed in telling the grand narrative of the changes that were happening in Danish culture. It was not only a time of unrest and discontent, but also of great expectations marked by a keen awareness of living in a moment of historical change. Historical change did come, of course, most famously in the political arena in the form of the constitution of 1849. But as *Livet efter døden* demonstrates, the philosophical, religious and aesthetic discussions leading up to this event were exceedingly complex, and fascinating.

Kjældgaard compares and contrasts the four writers, unpacks similarities and differences in a highly informative way. Heiberg, Møller, Martensen and Kierkegaard agreed that religion and art were in crisis. Likewise – even if they did not subscribe to the idea unconditionally – all were engaged in discussing immortality of the soul vis-à-vis the future of art. In these negotiations of art as anticipation of the hereafter, Heiberg, who brought the Hegelian news of the 'death of art' to Denmark, suggested that doubts about the immortality of the soul were a *symptom* of the crisis. Møller took a different stance and regarded reservations about immortality as the *reason* for the crisis. Initially skeptical about immortality of the soul, Møller had changed his mind (after the death of his first wife) and went so far as to pronounce that 'doubt about the immortality of individuals is the cancer of art' [Tvivl om Individernes Udødelighed er Kunstens Kræft] (26). Kierkegaard, not surprisingly, turned the question of immortality into an existential identity problem, with indirect communication as its necessary aesthetic *modus operandi*. Martensen, more or less aligned with Heiberg, formulated a concept of art as apocalyptic, a pre-articulation of judgment day. He applauded Heiberg's drama *En Sjæl efter Døden* [*A Soul after Death*] from 1840/41, and saw it as a comical enactment of the key questions in apocalyptic poetry. But, as Kjældgaard brilliantly shows, the drama has implicit seditious elements that would later allow Brandes to embrace *En Sjæl efter Døden* and portray it as a subversive and masked attack on Christian morality.

It is one of the real eye-openers of the book that we learn in such detail how the secularization that led to the Modern Breakthrough had already been anticipated by the late Golden Age. Kjældgaard is a brilliant communicator; he knows how to combine thoughtful textual analysis with meticulous contextualization. As a result, *Livet efter døden* is a *must-read* for scholars of the Danish Golden Age. It offers new perspectives for those interested in understanding the roads travelled in Danish aesthetic

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and philosophical thinking from the late Golden Age to the Modern Breakthrough, and beyond to our 'present time'.

KARIN SANDERS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY