I will start by quoting from my introduction to a book I edited 20 years ago, *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions*, marking the centennial of that event:

Centennials are strange affairs. Like their successive spawn, bi-, tri-, quadri-, quincentennials, and so on, they are contrived and accidental in nature. There can be something vulgarizing or trivializing about the sudden, sometimes feverish renewal of attention that sprouts up around the memory of important persons every hundred years after their births and death, or around the memory of famous events every hundred years after their occurrences. Centennial observances and kindred events often reveal more about the celebrants than about the celebrated.

For example, in 1992, the year when I was preparing that book, from the countless heated debates in both the academy and the news media over the character and legacy of the reputed “discoverer” of America, one could easily come away knowing something about the contemporary clash between Eurocentrism and political correctness, but not much about the Genoan explorer who sailed from Spain to the New World, and then back, five hundred years earlier.

Still, the marking of centennials is clearly expressive of a human need, perhaps connectable on some level with Mircea Eliade’s concept of eternal return, or even with Søren
Kierkegaard’s notions of recollection and repetition. In religious studies and related areas, this need has certainly been in evidence over the past several years, as illustrated by the slew of hundredth-year events that attracted attention: 2011, the quadricentennial of the King James Bible; 2012, the centennial of the first edition of Durkheim’s Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse; and now, 2013, the bicentennial of Kierkegaard’s birth—which coincides, never mind, with the great composer Richard Wagner’s own bicentennial. Both Kierkegaard and the composer of Parsifal—a legend that resonates interestingly with Kierkegaard’s writings, though the opera was completed several decades after Kierkegaard’s death—must now share the limelight with Paris’ Notre Dame Cathedral, which is currently celebrating its 850th year.

How can Kierkegaard’s life story hope to compete? It boasts of no rose window. No gargoyles—nor any headless saint. Nor a Quasimodo. With Kierkegaard, not too much excitement confronts us—at least overtly. Sure, there is the painful break from the single love of his life, and then, years later, his humiliating, year-long imbroglio with the local tabloid, The Corsair, whose cartoonist caricatured him not only as a cruel cad, but also as a hunchback, a kind of svelte, Nordic Quasimodo. And closing out the twilight of his relatively brief life, there was his fierce, bold attack upon his nation’s established church, an assault that zeroed in on Denmark’s twin ecclesiastical icons at that time, the recently deceased bishop Jakob Peter Mynster and his episcopal successor Hans Lassen Martensen. Still today, these two men’s larger-than-life busts stand triumphantly beside the north flank of Copenhagen’s Church of Our Lady—like centurions on guard, to assure their flock of protection against the likes of Søren Kierkegaard, whose own most conspicuous memorial, a statue of him writing, is situated blocks away, in the innocuously secular space of the Royal Library garden.
In sum, Kierkegaard’s life seems rather undramatic—unless you are Eliade, who discerned in it the recurrence of an ancient mythic pattern. He likened Kierkegaard to, of all people, Achilles, on the grounds that both men were lifelong bachelors. Achilles, observes Eliade, resisted the happy, fecund life that had been predicted for him, had he married, because in that case he would have given up his becoming a hero, and his uniqueness and immortality that came concomitantly with that status: “Kierkegaard passes through exactly the same existential drama with regard to Regine Olsen: he refuses marriage in order to remain himself, ‘the unique,’ to be able to hope for the eternal, by rejecting the modality of a happy existence in the ‘general.’”

Otherwise, aside from the highly public Corsair affair and assault on Christendom, Kierkegaard’s life offers little drama in the conventional sense—let alone physical movement outside the successive apartments he inhabited. Other than his daily walks about Copenhagen, his random chats with people on the streets (his “people baths,” as he called them), his theater- and concert-going, his occasional carriage rides through the countryside, and his five trips abroad (four times to Berlin, and once to Sweden), what confronts us is a most unconventional drama of intensely private, introspective, and yet obsessively recorded, inscribed, and transcribed existence that revolved around incessant reading and writing. Some even call his condition graphomania or hypergraphia, quite literally a mania or madness characterized by an uncontrollable compulsion to write.

This is part of why it seems apt to think of him as the literary Kierkegaard, or—to borrow a term coined by the Columbian author Diego Gil Parra, as an epitome of homo litterarius, someone who is human inasmuch as he or she writes and reads. In this regard Kierkegaard joins the ranks of two of his literary idols, Shakespeare and Cervantes; two of Kierkegaard’s own
admirers, Kafka and Borges; as well as Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and, perhaps, in our own times, writers like John Updike or Joyce Carol Oates. This is by no means to suggest that Kierkegaard was not also, of course, a philosopher or theologian, the terms by which he is most often described. The point is that the nature of his writings, for all the philosophizing and theologizing they entail, is essentially literary—in the sense of literary-artistic—rather than strictly philosophical or theological. He himself signals this in his journal through two self-reflective comments that practically frame his entire corpus of writings. The first comment, which he recorded in 1838, the year his first published work appeared, reads: “If I am a literary weed [or a weed in literature, Ukrud i Letteraturen]—well, then at least I am what is called ‘Proud Henry’”—an herb from the goosefoot family (Chenopodiaceae) known more fully as Proud Henry’s goosefoot, or more widely as “Good King Henry” (Chenopodium bonus henricus). Already betraying the confidence Kierkegaard had in his ability to produce a prolific literary output, this botanical analogy jocularly associates his writings with a weed whose rampant, pesky growth and proliferation might at least be compensated by its prideful, highfalutin name.

The second comment I have in mind was made by Kierkegaard in 1855, just months before his death: “I have managed to get my whole ‘prolix literature’ situated in literature until its time comes.” Here, the expression “whole ‘prolix [or longwinded, vidtløftige] literature’” is actually a quotation of a phrase by which Martensen had dismissively characterized Kierkegaard’s writings in an article of the previous year, averring that Kierkegaard produced more books, both signed and pseudonymous, than was divinely warranted. Remarkably, Kierkegaard turns the phrase around to make it speak in favor of his writings, bestowing an almost messianic aura upon them by suggesting in a distinctly biblical phrasing that his
“literature” need only wait “until its time comes [indtil dens Time kommer].” Think of Jesus, in his lament over Jerusalem at Luke 13:35, prophesying: “And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes [Dan.: førend den Tid kommer] when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Or think of Paul, at Hebrews 9:9–10, characterizing the various levitical rules dealing with food, drink, and baptisms as “regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right [Dan.: indtil den rette Ordnings Tid].” Expressed here is that same confidence evident not only in his “Proud Henry” remark seventeen years earlier, but also in two statements ascribed to him by personal acquaintances. Bemoaning once to his friend Hans Brochner that Danish literature “lacked a prose with the stamp of art,” Kierkegaard claimed to “have filled this gap.” On another occasion he reportedly told a friend: “Yes, you see. Well, Denmark has had its greatest sculptor in Thorvaldsen, its greatest poet in Oehlenschlæger, and its greatest prose stylist in me.”

This boast, whether apocryphal or not (and there is no reason to question its veracity), brings me to the topic upon which I wish to reflect this afternoon: the relation of Kierkegaard to literature (mainly), including language itself, as well as to the other arts (generally), and his legacy and influence as considered from the vantage of his present bicentennial—by when, it seems safe to say, his literature’s time has indeed come.

In 1934, that heyday of fascism, Nazism, communism, and what he called “mass rule,” the Swiss writer Denis de Rougement evoked the image of the hovering, disembodied, smiling face of the Cheshire Cat to capture the notion of Kierkegaard’s ironical spirit still laughing solitarily at the crowd, piercing through “the confusion of doctrines all over Europe.” Among the writers whose thought had transformed “the data of [people’s] lives,” Rougement distinguished two main “families.” The first, to which Hegel, Marx, and Georges Sorel belong, “acts only by
the objective content of its theories, not by its indifferent style. On the other hand,” wrote Rougement, with regard to the second family, the one by which he claimed to have been personally “arrested” and “set going … in [his] own direction”: “…a Pascal, a Kierkegaard, a Rimbaud act less by virtue of their conclusions than by that of their personal drama made ‘flesh’ by the turns of their language, the movement of their thought.”

In the case of Kierkegaard, this linguistic, reflective incarnating of his personal drama is rendered immeasurably more complex by what George Pattison calls the “moving kaleidoscope of [Kierkegaard’s] works, styles, and genres.” Moreover, anyone familiar with Kierkegaard’s so-called “aesthetic,” pseudonymous writings is acquainted with the dizzying array and variety of the different pseudonymous voices that speak from them. As much as any other literary artist ever, Kierkegaard exists largely in, or even as, a dialectic between his (and his pseudonyms’) reading of literature and his (and their) production of literature—literature, that is, again, in the conventional sense of poetic or literary art. Thus, we know, he was influenced not only by Plato, Kant, Hegel, and other philosophers, but no less profoundly by Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Hamann, and German Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel, Jean Paul, Novalis, Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Heine, as well as Oehlenschläger, Jens Baggesen, and other Danish writers. The vast, standard-setting series of several dozen volumes edited by Jon Stewart at the Kierkegaard Center in Copenhagen, entitled “Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources,” offers what is as close as possible to a comprehensive scholarly accounting of the manifold major thinkers, writers, poets, and others who influenced Kierkegaard, and also of those around the entire globe whom he in turn influenced.

Yet even the notion of “influence” becomes problematic when applied to Kierkegaard, given his insistence upon distinguishing himself from his pseudonyms. On a number of
occasions in his journal, Kierkegaard characterizes the relationship between his pseudonymous and signed writings through a memorable analogy he draws with one of the great rivers of the Iberian peninsula, renowned since ancient times for the geologically peculiar fact that, not far from its source, the river dives below the earth’s surface and follows a subterranean course before resurfacing some ten miles farther. “Just as the Guadalquibir [sic] River plunges into the earth somewhere and then comes out again,” writes Kierkegaard in 1849, “so I must now plunge into pseudonymity, but I also understand now how I will emerge again under my own name.”

This is a marvelous analogy, almost surely derived from his reading of the Cave of Montesinos episode in Don Quixote, but there is a problem: Kierkegaard cites the wrong river—that is, the Spanish river famous for its subterranean plunge is not the Guadalquivir (which never goes underground), but the Guadiana, as mentioned in Cervantes’ novel. Aside from this confusion of the rivers, however, Kierkegaard’s analogy can also seem misleading inasmuch it might distract us from remembering that all of Kierkegaard’s numerous Guadiana-like plunges “into pseudonymity” were accompanied by the surfacing of his various literary personae, all of whom must be acknowledged to embody not only separate, distinct writers but also separate, distinct readers in their own right, with interpretive propensities and world views that cannot necessarily be identified with Kierkegaard’s own or with those of each other. This rule holds true with the conflicting attitudes he and one of the pseudonyms expresses toward plagiarism. (Pertinent to this association of Kierkegaard and plagiarism is disclosure by Woody Allen’s Alvy Singer in Annie Hall: “I was expelled from NYU because, during a test on Kierkegaard, I looked into the soul of the boy next to me.”) Johannes Climacus, himself one of Kierkegaard’s “poetic creations,” after complacently claiming to be composing “the shabbiest plagiarism ever to appear [i.e., Philosophical Fragments], since it is nothing more or less than what any child knows,” goes
so far as to declare that “every poet who steals, steals from another poet, and thus we are equally shabby.”

It is hardly surprising that this last statement by Climacus seems to anticipate Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence.” Over the years, Bloom has referenced Kierkegaard so often that we are entitled to sense a betrayal of his debt to Kierkegaard through his appropriation of the term “anxiety,” a word whose Danish form—angst—practically bears Kierkegaard’s copyright. Consider the painting The Scream by Edvard Munch, himself an avid reader of Kierkegaard. Looking at it, we might not be liable to think of literary theory. Yet this iconic image of Kierkegaardian angst is directly pertinent to Bloom’s theory. For the works of all poets, in Bloom’s view, are conditioned by the anxieties the poets harbor over the influences exerted upon their imagination by the great predecessor-poets. And in the resulting agon or “struggle” of individual poets with their precursors, each of them willfully misreads those precursors’ works as a means of breaking free from the influence. As Bloom puts it, “influence-anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature,” and the “weakness” or “strength” of each poet is determined by the relationship she or he establishes with earlier poetry: “weak” poets, the majority, tend to compose work derivative of that relationship, whereas “strong” poets manage to break free and create original work.

Relevant to our present purpose, it is worth noting with Bloom that while this “anxiety had long preceded [our modern] usage” of the term “influence,” the modern notion of “poetic influence,” and the attendant anxiety it produced, crystallized around the time of Kierkegaard. In Bloom’s words, “with the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime, there came anxiety too, for art was beyond hard work.” Thus, in his essay “Self-Reliance” (the ideas for which he developed during the 1830s, but which he first published in 1841), Emerson lamented
of the great predecessors: “They engross our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of
ourselves; they prejudice our judgment in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our
own; and they intimidate us with this splendor of their renown.” Two years later, across the
Atlantic, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes de Silentio pronounced what could well serve as
the credo of any aspiring “strong,” rebellious poet or writer in the Bloomian sense: “The one
who will not work fits what is written about the virgins of Israel [Isa. 26:18]; he gives birth to the
wind—but the one who will work gives birth to his own father.” Not only did Kierkegaard
work—and work hard—but also, as a patently “strong” reader and writer committed to the art of
what Bloom terms “creative misprision” or misinterpretation. He evinced an almost aggressive
readiness to question, to second-guess, to criticize, and sometimes to propose rewritings of some
of the greatest literary classics—even those whose authors he revered. For example, in various
places in his journals and writings, Kierkegaard brands the entire second part of Goethe’s Faust a
mistake, objects to the ending of Nikolaus Lenau’s poem by that same title, and questions the
ending of Cervantes’ Don Quixote (and, really, whether that novel ought to end at all), while
Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Frater Taciturnus pronounces Shakespeare’s Hamlet a failure both as
a tragedy and in its not amounting to a religious drama.

Despite such chutzpah toward his literary ancestors, Kierkegaard considered it imperative
to acknowledge one’s literary debts. He did not share Climacus’ complacency regarding
plagiarism. Reputedly accused once as a schoolboy of plagiarizing a sermon of Bishop Mynster,
the adult Kierkegaard was angered to find his own ideas being echoed without acknowledgment
in a published article by his own secretary: “I hate all plagiarizing pirates,” he quipped. He also
once reproached his own brother Peter on the matter of plagiarism, and among the factors that
led Kierkegaard to break his friendship with the philosopher Rasmus Nielsen in 1850 was his
conviction that Nielsen had stolen Kierkegaard’s ideas from private conversations the two men had regularly had, and repeated them in his own writings while “conceal[ing] the extent of the borrowing.” As Kierkegaard put it, it was as if Plato had wearied of “attribute[ing] everything to Socrates.”

Consistent with his disdain for plagiarism, or for the refusal to acknowledge influence, Kierkegaard’s insistence that his pseudonyms be quoted under their own names stemmed from his wish that they be recognized as autonomous beings, each of them embodying a different orientation within the stages of existence, and each, therefore, expressing his own distinct perspective on life and the world. In this respect, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings, some of which have been likened to novels, foreshadow the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous concept of “polyphony,” a concept Bakhtin borrowed from musicology and applied to the modern novel genre, which he found epitomized in the works of Dostoevsky. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s novels are “polyphonic” in that they convey no one single, grand authorial “vision,” but instead establish a complex array of differing, competing, and often contradictory viewpoints expressed by the *dramatis personae*, all of which are granted equal weight, value, and autonomy. Had we time, we could pursue the analogy with Dostoevsky further: for example, just as Kierkegaard counterbalanced his pseudonymous writings with his volumes of signed religious discourses, so did the author of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* counterbalance his own literary-narrative output with the serially-published installments of his copious *Writer’s Diary*. Yet the analogy, we would find, soon breaks down, especially since Dostoevsky, unlike Kierkegaard, signed all of his writings, fictional and non-fictional alike, under his own name. There is no evidence that Dostoevsky went to the same lengths as Kierkegaard in assuming the personalities of his different characters.
As the rawest material evidence of the lengths to which Kierkegaard went, consider his handwriting, of which an entire lifetime’s worth can be examined in the form of his manuscripts, notebooks, and papers at Copenhagen’s Kierkegaard Archive. As observed by the authors of the fascinating study *Written Images: Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals, Notebooks, Booklets, Sheets, Scraps, and Slips of Paper* (Danish 1996; English 2003), “The major impression made by Kierkegaard’s handwriting is its great mutability or variation. This impression goes beyond the ordinary development everyone’s handwriting undergoes with age and the maturation of the personality. This mutability also appears in entries that were written close to one another in time; the difference can be so pronounced that we can scarcely believe that they were written by the same person.” Annelise Garde, a Danish graphologist who conducted an extensive investigation of Kierkegaard’s handwriting in 1977, found this variability to be a common trait running through the archival materials. “His handwriting,” she attested, “not only changed over longer periods of time, but also from day to day. If it were not for various quite unique characteristics, we could think that it had been written by different people. In his works he made use of this ability to be different people, but psychologically it was a sign of discord.”

Not only his handwriting, but his prose style, varied significantly, depending upon the particular genre and voice he employed at any given moment in his writing. During his student years, the mid and late 1830s, the stylistic and formal groundwork for his authorship was well under preparation. In those early formative years, as the Danish scholar Frederic Billeskov-Jansen observes, Kierkegaard wrote in two distinct styles. The first, a “stilted style,” was devised for public usage, as in his debut literary effort, an ironical article of 1834 on women, or later, in *From the Papers of One Still Living*. His other style, involving a “simple and inspired language,” is used in his journal: “As early as 1835 this personal style, vivacious and poetic, was fully
developed; that is to say, when not preoccupied with writing about literature or the public but
with his own future, his vocation, and his whole spiritual life, Kierkegaard was already a master
of language, a writer, an artist.” If this is the style that first made its public debut in his Magister
dissertation *The Concept of Irony* (much to the consternation and in some cases annoyance of his
professors, as we know from their comments), it is the same language that Joakim Garff finds
blossoming in the letters Kierkegaard sent to Regine from September 1840 to October 1841:
“The creaking Latin syntax . . . is here replaced by an enchanting suppleness that makes the lines
take wing. Displaying delicacy and rhythm, the letters bring inspired adoration to their subject
matter, drawing on images and metaphors and poetic allusions . . . . These letters are not ordinary
communication; they are art.”

In Kierkegaard, therefore, with his plurality of literary voices, his ever-shifting
handwriting, and his dueling, ever evolving prose styles matching his array of literary characters,
we encounter something like a writer’s equivalent of a method actor, one who, through
consciously (or unconsciously) applied techniques, cultivates within himself the thoughts and
emotions of each character he portrays, to the point that he will even alter himself physically to
fulfill a role—like Robert De Niro, who took several months off the shooting of *Raging Bull*
about the boxer Jake Lamotta in order to gain some 60 pounds to play the older LaMotta in the
film’s later scenes; or like Hilary Swank, who, to play the role of Brandon Teena, a
transgendered teen in *Boys Don’t Cry*, cut her hair and lived as a man for a month before the
filming began.

Yet Kierkegaard not only thought his way into the multiple personalities and worldviews
of his literary personae, fabricating his pseudonymous writings as, in effect, dramas in thought—
or thought dramas. He also dramatized his own existence. Like that prototypical antihero of the
first modern novel, Don Quixote, with whom Kierkegaard closely identified, and who superimposed fantastical plot-lines from chivalry books upon his own misadventures (most notoriously his attack on a windmill he perceived as a giant), Kierkegaard came to see himself as the protagonist in a drama, at times comical, at other times tragic, unfolding under the gaze of what he called his own “theatrical generation,” which was prone to misunderstanding and derision. Different scholars have commented on his “innate sense of the theatre” and his “histrionic sensibility”; the “theatrical display” put on by his pseudonyms; and how he “engaged throughout his career in a remarkable kind of theatrics in fulfilling his very vocation as a Christian author.” Alastair Hannay links this theatricality to the habit Kierkegaard had of construing each of his major conflicts with himself, and with his surroundings, as a “collision.” Kierkegaard drew this word from Hegel’s lectures on Aesthetics, where it refers to the conflicts of motivation and interest essential to drama, especially tragedy. As he came to look upon his life as a tragic one, he interpreted the events of his life in accordance with dramatic categories he had learned from Hegel, with the result that, by the time he broke his engagement with Regine, he “had begun to write himself into a real-life drama” (Hannay). Even his death seemed part of an enacted script. As Georg Lukács said that Kierkegaard died “like an actor taking his cue,” so Hannay suggests that the martyr’s role in which Kierkegaard cast himself, substituting his own drama for reality, placed him eventually into “a cultural corner from which the only way out was up,” and so he died “perfectly on cue.”

The “cultural corner” to which Hannay is referring, of course, is the one Kierkegaard backed himself into through his final “collision” with the Danish church. However, while it may be true that script is not drama, just as map is not territory, there can be no question that the drama of Kierkegaard that exerted such profound influences upon Western thinking and
writing—and the reason we are still talking about him today—is a literary drama whose alpha and omega are the human word, language, the *sine qua non* of his “‘prolix’ literature.” In characterizing his writings as a “literature ‘in literature,’” and designating his role in relation to the pseudonymous authorship as that of “editor,” “*souffleur*” (prompter), and “reader,” Kierkegaard conferred upon that whole body of work an autonomy that augurs the theory of Northrop Frye, for whom literature itself constitutes an autonomous “order of words” in which “the existing monuments of literature form an ideal order among themselves, and are not simply collections of the writings of individuals.” Indeed, long before Paul Ricoeur (or reader-response theorists), Kierkegaard understood that—in Riceour’s words—“The text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author.” The idea that the author becomes removed and distanced from his or her writings once they are in print accords with the logic by which Johannes Climacus refutes the cosmological theistic proof: namely, his observation that one could never hope “to demonstrate Napoleon’s existence from Napoleon’s works.” Even more to the point is the likening of the author and his book to the weaver-woman and her altar cloth in the preface to *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*: “But when the cloth is finished and placed in accordance with its sacred purpose—then she is deeply distressed if anyone were to make the mistake of seeing her artistry instead of the meaning of the cloth. . . . The meaning is in the beholder and in the beholder’s understanding when, faced with himself and his own self, he has in the infinite remoteness of separation infinitely forgotten the needlewoman and her part.”

If Kierkegaard suffered any anxiety over his writings, it was not an anxiety of influence. On the contrary, as an author, he was confident about his own position in relation to his predecessors, as well as to posterity. Recall his own pronouncement that his “‘prolix literature” was “situated in literature until its time comes’! However, the anxiety that Kierkegaard
manifestly did suffer over his writings had to do with language itself—the cloth from which all writings are woven. It has never been a secret that Kierkegaard had a problem with verbosity—his tendency to express himself through an over-abundance of language. During his lifetime, his professors, and later, the reviewers of his books, often griped about his prolixity. Such griping never stopped. During the 1940s, Eliade, otherwise a great admirer of Kierkegaard, complained a number of times in his own journal about the Dane’s wordiness. Finding Quidam’s diary so wordy as to be “unbearable,” Eliade added: “Kierkegaard’s prolixity exceeds even the extreme limits of decency.” No one, perhaps, has captured the matter more memorably than Woody Allen, in *Getting Even* (1978):

> I remember my reaction to a typically luminous observation of Kierkegaard’s: “Such a relation which relates itself to its own self (that is to say, a self) must either have constituted itself or have been constituted by another.” The concept brought tears to my eyes. My word, I thought, how clever! (I’m a man who has trouble writing two meaningful sentences on “My Day at the Zoo.”) True, the passage was totally incomprehensible to me, but what of it as long as Kierkegaard was having fun?

It is noteworthy that the sentence quoted by Allen comes from *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus’ meditation on despair and sin. For Kierkegaard well recognized the inherent association of language with sin. To be sure, music, too, is not lacking pertinence here. Regarding part 1 of *Either/Or*, Ron Hall points out that music, as a “nonreflexive semantic medium … perfectly suited to expressing the spirit of discarnate rebelliousness,” is the “perfect” medium for the demonic. Thus, modernity, finding its supreme expression in music, finds co-avatars in Don Giovanni, whose “hovering” existence as indifferent seducer can only be expressed truly in musical tone, and Faust, whose distrust of speech (*das Wort*) and avoidance of
worldly responsibility effect “a musicalization of self and world.” But there is a good reason extending all the way back to the first book of the Bible for Faust to distrust speech and language. As Clare Carlisle puts it, “The serpent’s question to Adam and Eve – “Did God say that you should not eat of the tree of knowledge?”—is the first question in the Hebrew Bible. It marks the moment when a gap appears between words and reality: prior to this, God’s speech correlates perfectly with his creation. For Kierkegaard, the birth of human language and the birth of human freedom happen together, and the gap this opens up is a space of possibility, uncertainty, ambiguity, temptation and desire. What if the serpent in this story—a slippery, duplicitous, seductive creature—represents language itself?” Kierkegaard was also mindful that it was the collective sin at Babel that led to the diversification and confusion of human languages.

Yet it is my suspicion that Kierkegaard’s wariness of language, a wariness that noticeably intensified toward the end of his life, stemmed not only from the biblical association of language with sin. In an article that appeared this spring in the Toronto Journal of Theology, but that began as a Kierkegaard Society banquet talk last November in Chicago, made on Ed Mooney’s kind invitation, I point out that, in addition to Kierkegaard himself, no fewer than five of his pseudonyms use the word *udfylde* (literally to fill [*fylde*], or to fill out [*ud*], up, or in) to speak negatively of the manifold ways by which spiritual emptiness, the human soul, heart, life, existence, or, above all, moments, hours, days, years, or time itself, can be filled. (The pseudonyms include the aesthete and Judge William in Either/Or, Quidam in Stages, as well as Johannes de Silentio and Climacus.) My suggestion in that article is that Kierkegaard’s whole “prolix literature” perhaps masks, though not always successfully, a suspicion of its own superfluity (*Overflødighed*, a favorite concept and term of Kierkegaard’s), and hence a sense of
profound humility, or even shame, for a lifelong commitment to expression through something so inadequately abstract and hence existentially false as language. From a self-humbling, kenotic perspective, no human could be more extraneous or superfluous than the ultimate indulger in language, *homo litterarius*, one who does nothing but fill up pages with writing—in some instances to a point that exceeds comprehensibility.

Woody Allen, who was clearly on to this idea, had fun singling out a sentence in Kierkegaard where the language seems to take on a life of its own, exceeding the parameters of normal semantics. In turn, Kierkegaard, who placed humor as an existential phase between the ethical and the religious stages, would have been the first to appreciate that it takes a humorist (like Allen) to expose the hilarity of such a phenomenon. Among the countless other writers and artists influenced by Kierkegaard, I would like to conclude by noting two who likewise focused on problems concerning language, though in different ways and for different purposes.

One is Kafka. Inspired by the treatment of the Akedah in *Fear and Trembling*, his parable “Abraham,” from a letter of June 1921 to his friend Robert Klopstock, transforms the gerontic patriarch of its title into a charter combining the figures of Don Quixote and a misfit schoolboy. After imagining Abraham as a ready and eager waiter who was unable to take a break from his duties to sacrifice Isaac, Kafka continues:

But take another Abraham. One who wanted to perform the sacrifice altogether in the right way and had a correct sense in general of the whole affair, but could not believe that he was the one meant, he, an ugly old man, and the dirty youngster that was his child. True faith is not lacking to him, he has this faith; he would make the sacrifice in the right spirit if only he could believe he was the one meant. He is afraid that after starting out as
Abraham with his son he would change on the way into Don Quixote. The world would have been enraged at Abraham could it have beheld him at the time, but this one is afraid that the world would laugh itself to death at the sight of him. However, it is not the ridiculousness as such that he is afraid of—though he is, of course, afraid of that too and, above all, of his joining in the laughter—but in the main he is afraid that this ridiculousness will make him even older and uglier, his son even dirtier, even more unworthy of being really called. An Abraham who should come unsummoned! It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one.

This parable can be read as a parody of *Fear and Trembling*, which Kafka had read several years earlier. The parable’s crux is the victimization of the man of faith by a divine joke: “An Abraham who should come unsummoned!” Don Quixote appears as a foolish Abraham when, summoned only by his own mad fantasy, he sallies forth as a knight, convinced that God has commissioned him to do so. While Kierkegaard’s Johannes de Silentio was preoccupied with Abraham’s quixotic leap of faith and suspension of the ethical, and while Miguel de Unamuno would later revere the knight for maintaining his faith in an absurdity despite his doubts, neither author considered the two figures as victims of a divine joke. Kafka’s parable does precisely that. It not only presents God as possibly a jokester in the person of the schoolmaster who calls the worst student (Abraham or Don Quixote) to the head of the class to suffer the “punishment” of
his classmate’s laughter, but it also points to the fateful—and potentially fatal, the case of the Akedah—ambiguity of divine language. Is that language real? If it is real, is it heard by the right people? When prophets think they are summoned, are they really summoned?

I close now, briefly, with the example of a very different Kierkegaard-inspired work that hinges on a language-related theme: the Danish playwright Kaj Munk’s *Ordet* (1932, *The Word*), one of the most frequently staged Scandinavian plays of the last century, adopted as a film in 1955, by Carl-Theodor Dreyer. Set among struggling inhabitants of rustic Jutland, *Ordet* focuses on the household of yeoman farmer Mikkel Borgen. For much of the story, his second son, Johannes, is absent, having wandered off believing that he is Jesus Christ, having earlier lost his sanity from reading too much Kierkegaard. In the closing scene, set in the parlor of the father’s home, the entire Borgen family gathers, together with several neighbors, the family’s physician, and their priest, around the open coffin of Inger, the deceased wife of Borgen’s oldest son, Young Mikkel. Inger died several days earlier from medical complications that resulted from her giving birth to a dead child. The climactic action of the play, which elicited much debate and even protests when the work was first performed, is an actual “miracle”: Inger resurrects from her open coffin. How did this miracle come about? Johannes suddenly returned, having regained his sanity, and he chided all the adults present for their halfheartedness, reproaching them for their failure to ask God to restore Inger, who must therefore “lie and rot, because the times are rotten.” The play and the film take their title from the fact that Inger revives only after Johannes beseeches God to bestow “the Word [*Ordet*]—the Word that can bring the dead alive.”

Here, Munk’s play (or Dreyer’s film) inverts Kafka’s parable. In both works, the parable and the play, the connection between God and human being occurs through language. But in the parable, neither the Abrahamic hearing nor the Divine summoning can be trusted, whereas in the
play, the whole problem is shown to have lain in the human lack of sufficient faith even to think of invoking the divine, life-giving “Word.” How can two works, whose Kierkegaardian influences are equally apparent, arrive at endings as fundamentally opposed as these? If, during this bicentennial, his ironical spirit continues to smile down on us, we are entitled to suspect that Kierkegaard would appreciate the persistence with which his writings still convey such irresolvable, either/or quandaries.