

ARTÍCULO DE REFLEXIÓN

Kierkegaard and His Literary Figures. A Hermeneutical Proposal¹**Kierkegaard y sus figuras literarias. Una propuesta hermenéutica²**

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Resumen

Este capítulo pretende analizar el uso que Kierkegaard hace de las figuras literarias para definir la función que ellas asumen en el marco de su pensamiento filosófico, para destacar el significativo rol que cumplen. Bajo este entendido, inicialmente me preguntaré por la naturaleza de las figuras literarias en general, para entender cómo Kierkegaard las conjuga a lo largo de su obra. Luego de esto, pasaré a analizar su función específica, para conectar el concepto de figura literaria con el de máscara y así brindar una lectura innovadora acerca su papel en la filosofía de Kierkegaard, la cual será sustentada considerando el ejemplo de la figura literaria más importante de todas, a saber, Cristo. Sucesivamente, esbozaré unas conclusiones generales útiles para sustentar la pertinencia de acercarse de esta forma al estudio de Kierkegaard y proponer unas pautas metodológicas de análisis de las mismas. Finalmente, brindaré un ejemplo práctico del uso de estas para el estudio de la figura del Fausto.

¹¹ Translation into English of: Fabio Bartoli (2026), “Kierkegaard y sus figuras literarias”, in Fabio Bartoli (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaard: doce matices a su filosofía*. Filosófica Editorial, pp. 87-113.

²² Traducción al inglés de: Fabio Bartoli (2026), «Kierkegaard y sus figuras literarias», en Fabio Bartoli (ed.), *Søren Kierkegaard: doce matices a su filosofía*. Filosófica Editorial, pp. 87-113.

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Palabras claves: figuras literarias, hermenéutica, máscara, filosofía de la literatura, Fausto

Abstract

In this article I want to analyze Kierkegaard's use of literary figures in order to define the function they assume in the framework of his philosophical thought, to highlight their enormous role. Under this understanding, I will initially wonder about the nature of literary figures in general, to understand how Kierkegaard conjugates them throughout his work. I will then go on to analyze the specific function of the two categories of figures, to connect this concept with that of the mask and thus provide an innovative reading of their role in Kierkegaard's philosophy, which will be supported by considering the example of the most important literary figure of all, namely Christ. Subsequently, I will outline some general conclusions useful to support the pertinence of approaching the study of Kierkegaard in this way and propose methodological guidelines for their analysis. Finally, I will provide a practical example of their use in the study of the figure of Faust.

Keywords: literary figures, hermeneutic, mask, philosophy of literature, Faust

Introduction

In approaching the work of Kierkegaard, the impressive variety of literary styles and themes expressed by the Danish author throughout his career becomes evident. In this context, the extensive use of literary figures within his oeuvre undoubtedly captures attention. For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to any type of figure that has a direct or indirect relationship with the literary medium, regardless of the nature of the original text. Throughout the analysis, I will provide a more detailed examination of the nature of these literary figures in relation to Kierkegaard's philosophical propositions.

Thus, taking one of Kierkegaard's early works, *Either/Or*, as an example, the presence of various figures extracted from the Western literary tradition, such as Don Juan, Faust, and the

Wandering Jew, can be noted; their roles are fundamental for understanding the development of the text. Simultaneously, the function of other literary figures, the pseudonyms⁴, which Kierkegaard himself invents for narrative purposes and, more generally, to implement his communicative strategy, is evident. The renowned objective of this strategy is to "introduce Christianity into Christendom" (SKS 16, 24) ⁵

These brief references are sufficient to delineate a pattern that can be summarized by noting that the Danish author consistently resorts to literary figures to develop his reflections.

However, it is surprising how little interest specialized studies have shown in this aspect of Kierkegaard's production (Nun and Stewart, 2016, p. XI), to the extent that it can be stated that it has almost gone unnoticed. Without delving into the factors that have led to this absence, this work seeks to help fill this gap, heeding the recommendation made in the preface of one of the few books that has addressed the subject. There, the hope is expressed to encourage further research that highlights the importance of literary figures for the understanding of Kierkegaard's work (Nun and Stewart, 2016, p. XII). This endeavor aims to respond to that call through some methodological reflections.

More specifically, this analysis aims to examine Kierkegaard's use of literary figures to define the functions they assume within the framework of his philosophical thought, emphasizing their significant role. To achieve this, I will begin by exploring the nature of literary figures in general, in order to understand and explain how Kierkegaard integrates them throughout his work. I will focus on the fact that they can be classified into two broad categories: literary figures that Kierkegaard draws from the literary tradition, and literary figures that he himself

⁴ In this text, it will not be possible to explain in detail and in its entirety the complex interplay of pseudonyms that Kierkegaard develops throughout his work. In this regard, refer to the foundational study by Luis Guerrero (2020, pp. 107-136), which compiles and systematically organizes all the necessary information on the subject.

⁵ (Trans. Mod). For textual quotations from Kierkegaard's works, I will refer to the critical edition of the author's complete original works, namely *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter (SKS)*. The references in parentheses correspond to the volume and pages of the edition mentioned and follow the canonical method of citation used by Kierkegaard scholars. For the English translation of the Danish text, I used the critical translation by Howard y Edna Hong, namely *Kierkegaard's Writings*, whenever possible and useful.

creates. Following this, through the study of several examples found in the work of the Danish philosopher, I will analyze the specific functions of these two categories of figures to establish the relationship between this concept and that of the mask, thereby providing an innovative reading of their role in Kierkegaard's philosophy. To substantiate this reading, I will consider the most important literary figure of all: Christ. Subsequently, I will outline some general conclusions that will serve to justify the relevance of approaching Kierkegaard's study in this manner and propose methodological guidelines for their analysis. Finally, I will provide a practical example of their application in the study of the figure of Faust. Throughout this endeavor, I will engage in a continuous hermeneutic dialogue with Kierkegaardian texts⁶, aimed at clarifying the role of literary figures within them. The structure of the article corresponds to these moments of analysis.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this text is directed both at those with expertise who wish to read Kierkegaard through a new lens, and at those who are neophytes seeking to approach the Danish thinker for the first time without adhering to the classical approaches found in standard handbooks.

1. On literary figures in general and Kierkegaard's use of them

Although the concept of “figure” has undergone a lengthy and intricate development throughout history, it has undoubtedly maintained a close relationship with the field of rhetoric and, consequently, with literature in general since the beginning (Auerbach, 1998). It is important to highlight that this term is distinguished by its multifaceted usage, which has involved an intriguing mix of connotations that often transcend the primary use of employing a figure to represent something. Following Auerbach's study, within this range of meanings, there are a couple that apply very well to Kierkegaard's case, from which it is appropriate to begin to develop the analysis. I refer to the initial Ovidian use of the term, which denotes

⁶ It is important to emphasize that the conceptual background of this work is grounded in a hermeneutic stance, which can be encapsulated by the adage of Hösle (2007, p. 207): “those who approach texts by formulating the right questions will uncover things hidden from those who do not consider such questions or do not comprehend them”. In this case, the questions we aim to formulate correctly specifically pertain to literary figures.

something "dynamic, transformable, and ambiguous" (Auerbach, 1998, p. 59); and Quintilian's initial use of the same word to indicate something that serves to "hide, cover"(Auerbach, 1998, p. 65).

In the first instance, the dynamic nature of Kierkegaard's use of literary figures becomes evident in the changing traits they assume in his treatment. In fact, it is rare for Kierkegaard to speak of a literary character only once, and it is even less likely that he does so always in the same, identical terms, whether in his published works or in his private papers. Some examples of this are A and Don Giovanni. Indeed, the first instance corresponds to the pseudonym that Kierkegaard invents to represent the aesthete of the first part of *Either/Or*, who, managing his life within the guidelines set by German Romanticism, lacks any fixed trait of personality entirely, due precisely to his style of life, which implies a gradual annihilation of one's own individuality, as demonstrated, for example, by this aphorism:

On the whole, I lack the patience to live. I cannot see the grass grow, and if I cannot do that, I do not care to look at it at all. My views are the superficial observations of a "*fahrender Scholastiker* [traveling scholastic]" who dashes through life in the greatest haste. It is said that our Lord satisfies the stomach before the eyes. That is not what I find: my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything, and yet I hunger (SKS 2, 34 / EO1, 25).

Another piece of evidence for this is found when we observe that throughout the entire work, the identity of this character is never revealed, not even his name, precisely to emphasize the lack of substantiality in his personality. Similarly, one of the figures that A addresses in his papers is Mozart's Don Giovanni, who, driven by his absolute desire, adapts his physical and personal traits each time he encounters a new woman to conquer, as his desire completely dominates his interiority, at the risk of his personality being dissolved due to the constant changes to which it is subjected. In fact, "Don Juan is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency, an individual who is continually being formed but is never finished, about whose history one cannot learn except by listening to the noise of

the waves” (SKS 2, 97 / EO1, 92). These are two extreme examples, to which many more could be added, illustrating the mutability that Kierkegaard seeks to convey when introducing literary figures in his works.

In this regard, it is possible to trace the reasons for this peculiar relationship between “literary figures” and “mutability” back to Kierkegaard’s own philosophical framework, particularly his existential-religious stance. In fact, one of the critical points of reference for the entire Danish author’s work was precisely Hegel’s idealism. Without delving into the complex relationship between these two authors, which has been extensively analyzed by specialized critics (Binetti, 2015) and (Stewart, 2007), we can assert that one of the focal points of Kierkegaard’s critique of the German philosopher centered on the latter’s logical system, which Kierkegaard considered overly abstract. Specifically, Kierkegaard believed that the entire conceptual framework constructed by Hegel aimed to confine the human being within a cage of concepts that failed to consider the actual dynamics—always mutable and uncertain—of human existence.

Approaching our problem from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the flexibility provided by using literary figures is advantageous when expressing ideas related to existence, rather than the rigidity offered by concepts, which may be the appropriate tool for handling scientific thought but are inadequate for conveying all the nuances of human experience (Rella, 2004, p. 10). In this context, and recalling that to “introduce Christianity into Christendom,” Kierkegaard needed to persuade his readers of the imposture represented by their lifestyle—presumed to be Christian but not truly so—the literary figures served precisely to achieve this goal more convincingly.

In fact, it is considerably simpler for individuals to identify with an argument developed through figures than if the same issue were presented through concepts, even if such a presentation were possible. Kierkegaard himself was not unfamiliar with the practice of self-interpreting aspects of his life through literary figures, as demonstrated by the so-called “Faustian project” (Bravo Jordan, 2020, pp. 171-192). In this regard, literary figures also

served Kierkegaard in explaining things from an initial perspective that was presumed to be popular among his readers. Indeed, making an anachronistic but telling comparison, literature in its written and oral forms at that time functioned to disseminate ideas similarly to how television did more recently, and how platforms like Instagram or TikTok might currently operate. Thus, it was precisely in this realm that it was easier to find common ground among the various categories of readers that he envisioned as comprising his audience. Furthermore, this allowed him to detach from concepts and theory, which were not easily accessible to everyone and were inadequate for describing the dynamism of existence.

These considerations also help us understand why Kierkegaard employed a copious number of literary figures throughout his work: if many people were to be convinced of the ambiguity in their lives, then many literary figures needed to be proposed to cover the widest possible range of ways of living.

It is appropriate to conclude by emphasizing that all these facets of using literary figures aimed *to reveal to readers the emptiness of their diverse and mutable lifestyles, so they would be open to receiving the Christian message he sought to spread.*

According to this, it is necessary to revisit the second facet I highlighted regarding the possible use of the term “figure” as something that serves to cover and hide. In this context, it is also easy to trace examples of how this meaning is relevant regarding Kierkegaard's use of literary figures. Citing a couple of examples, we could consider the cases of Antigone and Victor Eremita, who appear in *Either/Or*.

These two characters are very useful for illustrating my point clearly, as both have an evident and direct relationship with a specific type of concealment, the secret (Rocca, 2012, pp. 100-107). In the case of the classical character, she is the protagonist of the essay *The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama*, where the hypothesis of a modern version of Antigone's tragedy is proposed. According to speaker A, this version should be a story founded precisely around the theme of the secret, where Oedipus's offenses, her father,

have not been publicly revealed, and he has been able to die of old age in his royal bed. In this version, only Antigone is aware of these secrets, and she guards them resolutely. The tragic situation occurs when she falls in love with a young man and finds herself conflicted between this passion and the need not to violate her family's privacy. Antigone cannot bear the weight of this tension and dies precisely because of her secret, since "to take her secret away—this is what the lover must struggle to do, and yet it is also her certain death" (SKS 2, 136 / EO1, 164).

Regarding our analysis, this brief description suffices to show the role Kierkegaard assigns to the literary figure of Antigone in terms of concealment and to underline the importance of secrecy in his era rather than the little relevance it held in antiquity.

In a similar vein, the figure of Victor Eremita can be understood, as he serves as the editor of the work. In the preface, he recounts how he acquired the papers he is presenting to the public, explaining that he found them casually inside a secret drawer of a piece of furniture bought at a thrift shop. This contingency gives him the opportunity to reflect—against Hegel—on the discrepancy between the internal and the external, particularly in cases where there is a context implying a secret (SKS 2, 11). This theme recurs throughout the work to such an extent that it would be difficult not to agree with Rocca's reading when he states that the issue of secrecy is a fundamental interpretative key for approaching the book effectively (Rocca, 2012, p. 101). Moreover, Kierkegaard invented this very character precisely to conceal his true personality as the book's author for the purposes of his communicative strategy.

From all this, it derives that the two literary figures analyzed have the clear function of concealing something from those who approach them. It is pertinent to specify that in this initial approach, I have chosen only examples drawn from the work *Either/Or*, so that the context was consistent in each explanation, and I have considered them respecting the bifurcation exposed in the introduction: literary figures Kierkegaard retrieves from the literary tradition (Antigone and Don Giovanni), and literary figures he invented (Victor Eremita and

A). However, these two patterns are easily traceable throughout the entirety of the Danish author's work.

Understanding this dual aspect of Kierkegaard's use of literary figures—to convey the dynamism of something, that is, to show the constant becoming of existence, and to conceal—helps us approach the problem from a different perspective, which is crucial for furthering the analysis. In fact, if we consider these two newly mentioned characteristics together, we can understand that these literary figures in Kierkegaard function as if they were masks⁷. Since antiquity, the mask has had the dual function of revealing by concealing or, if one wishes, concealing by revealing (Reale, 2021, p. 30).

2. Implications of the Relationship Between Literary Figures and Masks

Defining the relationship between literary figures and masks in Kierkegaard's work is not a trivial hermeneutic whim; rather, it is crucial for highlighting other facets that literary figures have within his work and also provides insight into how they should be approached methodologically. For instance, the analytical examples we have developed so far need to be reevaluated, since if literary figures are masks, they cannot solely serve to reveal or conceal something but *must fulfill both functions simultaneously*. For example, the character, namely A displays his personal mutability and the disastrous consequences of his lifestyle, while also hiding, among other things, his true personality. In other words, once it is established that literary figures in Kierkegaard correspond to masks, this fact cannot be ignored from a methodological standpoint, as it has decisive implications for our understanding of Kierkegaardian philosophy, which we must now explore.

First, it is essential to emphasize that the mask is not an object, or an experience if you will, that can be separated from humans, as humans and masks are inseparable (Kerényi, 2017, pos.

⁷ Considering this correspondence, from now on the terms "literary figures" and "masks" will be used interchangeably, as I have demonstrated that, in Kierkegaard, the first concept can align with the second, rendering them semantically synonymous.

5950). In other words, discussing masks necessarily involves referring to humans in general⁸. Given this established union, it is important to add that the mask fulfills a wide variety of functions within human experience, among which we have already highlighted those of covering and showing. However, these functions also encompass other areas, such as frightening the audience (Kerényi, 2017, pos. 5955). Among these other facets, there is one that is particularly relevant for better understanding Kierkegaard's situation: *the mask establishes a relationship between the material and spiritual worlds*, which can be articulated both from a ritual and an existential perspective (Bertò, 2012, pp. 17-18). In the specific case of Kierkegaard, this is fundamental, as this connection, with its existential implications, maintains a clear affinity with his philosophical-existential framework, particularly concerning the theme of the relationship between the individual and God. In fact, according to Kierkegaard, the “typical” situation in which humans find themselves can be described in this way:

MAN is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consist in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self (SKS 11, 130 /SUD, 17).

This “typical” anthropological condition outlined by Kierkegaard is usually accompanied by despair, or the sickness unto death, which is an existential situation resulting from a personal life course that neglects to direct the synthesis in the correct way, ultimately disregarding the ultimate meaning of existence. This oversight can be remedied by considering that “the self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude which relates itself to itself, whose task is to

⁸ In this regard, this would not be inconsistent with Kierkegaard's framework, as it can be asserted that the anthropological question is present within the scope of his interests: see, for example, Ángel Viñas Vera (2016, pp. 155-162)

become itself, a task which can be performed only by a relationship to God” (SKS 11, 146 / SUD, 44). In other words, humans are a synthesis whose existence can only be meaningful if they, standing before God through the leap of faith, manage to reclaim their existential dimension, which, in Kierkegaardian terms, translates into living a religious way of life. From this, it follows that the communicative and persuasive functions of Kierkegaardian masks can facilitate this leap of faith necessary to stand before God; that is, they can create this relationship between the material and spiritual worlds that would otherwise be impossible to construct.

This reflection on the existential implications of the mask in Kierkegaard provides me a springboard for a more extensive analysis on this subject. Indeed, by assuming that humans cannot be separated from the mask and that this relationship has evident existential implications, we begin to see a clear affinity with Kierkegaard's entire philosophical framework, which is distinguished by its focus on the existential sphere of the human being. This, while not entirely neglecting it, somewhat sidelines the rigorous conceptual analysis that, for example, distinguished thinkers of German Idealism, particularly Hegel⁹, among others. Moreover, this affinity allows us to reassess the role and significance that the theme of the mask holds within Kierkegaard's entire thought, as I believe it has been underestimated by scholarship to date or, at the very least, approached from a biased perspective. This is a topic that has already been addressed by specialized literature over the years¹⁰.

Without attempting to review all the texts here and despite the differences among them, a common interpretive pattern can be identified. Specifically, it is generally assumed that the pseudonyms (and not the literary figures) are masks, serving as a literary device that Kierkegaard implemented in his communicative strategy to persuade the reader through Christ (Amoroso, 1990, p. 65). This interpretation is based on a passage from *The Point of View*,

⁹ From a reception standpoint, this is demonstrated by the fact that Kierkegaard is considered one of the fathers of existential philosophy: see, for example, Wahl (2002).

¹⁰ Considering the number of works that delve into this topic, it would be impossible to address them all. For the purposes of this analysis, I will limit myself to mentioning two texts from two different academic contexts to serve as examples: Amoroso (1990) and Torralba (2003).

which states, "From the total point of view of my whole work as an author, the esthetic writing is a deception" (SKS 16, 36 / PV, 53). Of course, this is not a deception to be understood in a strictly negative sense, as it is necessary to ensure Christianity triumphs in the mindset of his contemporaries, harming Christendom.

Without undervaluing this interpretation, which I have defended in the past (Bartoli, 2021), it is necessary to place it within a broader discourse that can be developed thanks to the findings of earlier reflections. Indeed, if the analysis begins directly with the masks and not the literary figures, one immediately loses a facet of the problem, as the latter are excluded *a priori* from the equation, thus relinquishing the opportunity to grasp the need to study these two elements as parts of a unified framework and not as disconnected issues. This inevitably leads to focusing solely on Kierkegaard's communicative and authorial strategy without considering the plasticity that such literary figures offer the writer in addressing the existential issues of his readers, overlooking the argumentative strength that Kierkegaard sees in and harnesses from them.

Moreover, failing to consider this does not merely reflect an analytical oversight, but also prevents us from broadening our view of the relationship between Kierkegaardian masks and his entire philosophical framework without confining ourselves to the communicative strategy alone, which plays a fundamental role, but does not encompass everything since its function is to convey a message, not to create it. In fact, the emphasis on existence that Kierkegaard places at the center of his thought aligns perfectly with the existential implications of using masks, to the point where, following my analysis, it can be asserted that it would be reductive to regard the masks exclusively as a literary expedient employed by Kierkegaard for communicative purposes.

Conversely, the mask can be considered a necessary aspect of his philosophy because only by developing his thought in this way could he "create" a philosophy coherent with the dynamics of existence itself, as Kierkegaard intended. In other words, the functionality of the masks to Kierkegaard's communicative strategy is a consequence of the much deeper fact that his entire

philosophical framework is a thought developed through figures, or, more precisely, through masks.

In this case, Nietzsche's aphorism that “every profound spirit needs a mask” (1886, vol. II, n. 40) is very applicable, as Kierkegaard, to create a philosophical discourse that spoke directly to the human existential condition, needed to constantly create or adapt masks, as this was the only possible language to advance a thought of this nature. Using a terminology that might be considered anachronistic but owes much to Kierkegaardian philosophy, the communicative strategy was an ontic explanation that overlooked its ontological cause.

In light of this, I consider that the necessary elements are in place to propose the provocative claim that *if Kierkegaard's philosophy had not been developed through masks, it would not have existed, as it would not have had an adequate language to unfold*. This lengthy reflection is confirmed by another literary figure, which Kierkegaard connects with his religious message, namely, Christ.

3. Christ as a Literary Figure

Following the plan of his communicative strategy, the latter part of Kierkegaard's production is primarily dedicated to the theme of Christian faith and its message. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus defends the thesis that a philosophy of Christianity cannot be developed, as this subject is not amenable to conceptual systematization; rather, only fragments—or crumbs—can be gleaned from it. This argument is revisited in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, focusing on the nature of the truth of Christianity. From the outset, the author asserts that the truth of Christianity cannot be objectively proven (SKS 7, 29). This is interesting because “it implies that the problem is no longer that of objective truth but rather the relationship each individual has with what they have chosen as their truth in their existence, in this case, Christianity. In other words, the problem is whether the individual wants to become a Christian” (Rocca, 2012, p. 180). For the individual to orient themselves among the various positions that appear to be Christian without necessarily being

so, they must consider “Scripture is regarded as the secure resort for decisions about what is Christian and what is not” (SKS 7, 31 / CUPH, 22). On this topic, Kierkegaard dedicates several pages of extraordinary beauty to defining the appropriate method for reading Scripture in relation to faith, concluding, among other things, that “Faith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come straightforwardly. On the contrary, in this objectivity one loses the infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness that is the condition of faith, the *ubique et nusquam* in which faith can come into being” (SKS 7, 36 / CUPH, 26).

Initially, from all these considerations, I am particularly interested in highlighting the recurring importance of the individual's existential sphere for achieving faith, and likewise, it is noteworthy that both elements are directly related to a peculiar attitude toward a book: the *Bible*. According to this framework, this type of reader must approach the Bible with the right questions that allow them to have a personal and existential relationship with it, to properly find the path to Christianity. Hence, it would be futile to seek Christian concepts, as we have already seen how they do not align well with the existential stance Kierkegaard deems necessary; rather, it is essential to search for examples that exemplify the Christian message. Of course, if truth is a life and not a collection of propositions or concepts, then, according to Kierkegaard, the life to be taken as an example cannot be apart from that of Christ. From all this, it follows that when reading the Bible, the reader must pay particular attention to the example of Christ. Regarding our concerns, it is evident, then, that Christ here takes the status of the literary figure more than all others¹¹. In fact, it is no coincidence that the book most focused on this argument, namely *Practice in Christianity*, begins with this invocation:

Lord Jesus Christ, would that we, too, might become contemporary with you in this way, might see you in your true form and in the surroundings of actuality as you walked here on earth, not in the form in which an empty and meaningless or a thoughtless-romantic or a historical-talkative remembrance has distorted you, since it is not the form of abasement in which the believer sees you, [XII 2] and

¹¹ It is appropriate to clarify that with this statement, I do not intend to diminish the religious dimension of the figure of Christ; rather, I aim to propose an alternative reading of the issue.

it cannot possibly be the form of glory in which no one as yet has seen you. Would that we might see you as you are and were and will be until your second coming in glory, as the sign of offense and the object of faith, the lowly man, yet the Savior and Redeemer of the human race, who out of love came to earth to seek the lost, to suffer and die, and yet, alas, every step you took on earth, every time you called to the straying, every time you reached out your hand to do signs and wonders, and every time you defenselessly suffered the opposition of people without raising a hand—again and again in concern you had to repeat, “Blessed is the one who is not offended at me.” Would that we might see you in this way and that we then might not be offended at you! (SKS 12, 17-18 / PC, 7-8)

In this lengthy passage, we can find a compendium of many themes that we have touched upon throughout the analysis. Initially, the author laments the fact that the figure of Christ has been transfigured due to the misreadings propagated by the Church throughout history, and he advocates for the necessity of reading and interpreting His life more coherently with the representations offered in Scripture. In other words, Kierkegaard calls for a better handling of the literary figure of Christ, which has been misunderstood by institutions and, consequently, by the faithful.

With this call for attention, the Danish author is reflecting again on the appropriate relationship that must be maintained with literary figures, which cannot be considered empty vessels that can be filled with any type of content, thus providing infinite possibilities of interpretation. Instead, it is necessary to situate them in their historical context so that, from this perspective, and through the critical reading of primary sources, we can develop their intrinsic elements, without risking over-interpretation by attributing inappropriate elements to their nature, which would exceed the interpretative limits imposed by the figures themselves. In other words, Kierkegaard is urging us toward hermeneutic prudence while offering operational guidelines for correct interpretative practice. In addition, this calls for hermeneutic prudence remains relevant today, because it stands against the poor interpretative practices rampant in the contemporary cultural landscape, where the malpractice of over-interpreting topics and

authors prevails without minimally considering the constraints that texts impose on their interpretation.

Hence, the call to return to the authentic figure of Christ, which, however, differs from other literary figures precisely because of its original message, which carries the true Christian message, while the others merely reflect certain aspects of human existence, which, in comparison to the religious message, can be considered of lesser importance. This is the major difference with the other great example of a literary character that Kierkegaard presents in his works: Socrates, who provided a positive example of life but one that was disjointed from the Christian message and therefore less significant than Christ's.

Secondly, implicitly, the author is highlighting the mask-like nature of the figure of Christ, which fulfills all the characteristics I have previously outlined regarding other examples. Indeed, it can be seen how the figure of Christ, through this ambivalence in its distinctive features—for instance, its insignificance versus its role as redeemer and its function as both object and scandal of faith—has the task of revealing the true Christian message to readers who approach Scripture with the right existential attitude—thus unmasking the supposed religious lifestyles proposed by the official Danish church, which entirely ignore the true Christian message—while concealing it from those who have not yet adopted the correct inner posture. From all this, the existential implications of this mask become apparent, and, following Kierkegaard's framework that places faith at the center of the anthropological question, the necessity of this mask within the framework of the Danish philosopher's thought also becomes evident, as it is only through it that a relationship between the earthly and the spiritual can be established in the terms advocated by Kierkegaard.

Thus, this brief reflection has served to demonstrate that considering the literary figure of Christ as the central axis of the entire Kierkegaardian philosophical framework is a legitimate stance that, consequently, allows us to positively reevaluate, from another perspective, the importance of all literary figures in the Danish author's thought. According to this, it is

appropriate to conclude this writing with the outline of some methodological guidelines that may prove useful in studying and understanding this topic.

4. Some Methodological Guidelines for Approaching Literary Figures in Kierkegaard

One of the elements that the previous analysis has clearly established is that literary figures, understood in their function as masks, have an intrinsic relationship with the philosophical-existential message that Kierkegaard seeks to propose to the point where it has been asserted that they cannot be considered merely as rhetorical devices. Instead, they play a necessary role in the development of his thought due to his prioritization of the human existential sphere, which eludes any attempt at rigorous conceptualization because of its constantly evolving dynamics. Then, I now want to provide some methodological guidelines to consider when analytically approaching the study of these figures, based on the same elements I have highlighted in this work.

In approaching a literary figure in Kierkegaard's work, the first concern should be to trace the original sources from which Kierkegaard draws the figure, to place it in its historical context, and to avoid the risk of skewing the analysis. A clear example of this is Don Quixote, which, in Kierkegaard, cannot have any origin besides Cervantes' book. A more interesting case is provided by Don Juan, who has undergone various reinterpretations throughout his reception. Here, we must determine whether Kierkegaard is referring to Tirso de Molina's version or Lorenzo da Ponte's libretto for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. In this instance, we know that Kierkegaard refers to both but does so at different points in his work and, importantly, in relation to specific issues for which he considers one version better suited than the other—Spanish or Italian-Austrian. Often, Kierkegaard leaves traces of his primary sources in the notes of his private journals or directly within the text discussing the figure in question.

This initial sorting allows us to identify the limits of our interpretation, avoiding the trap of anachronism or general incoherence. Of course, this does not apply to the masks he creates as pseudonyms, where the reference context aligns with the same situation of the writer, allowing

us to move directly to the second point. This involves identifying the function that the mask should serve in the discourse presented by Kierkegaard. From the previous analysis, we have noticed that each mask works to reveal something by demonstrating its mutability while simultaneously concealing something else. Thus, an example like Climacus can be approached by considering that one of its functions is to clarify certain aspects of Kierkegaard's authorship while continuing to conceal the author's true identity, thereby allowing him to further develop his ideas without being bound by the positions presented by his pseudonym Climacus (Dip, 2018, p. 25). It's important to remember that these two functions are inseparable; otherwise, they would not be masks. Although one may be more emphasized than the other, both must be fulfilled simultaneously.

Once the role of the mask is elucidated, we must ask about the existential implications it holds for the author and, especially, for the reader, to determine how it fits into Kierkegaard's philosophical-existential framework. Indeed, it has already been established that this relationship between mask and existence is necessary, so we simply need to unveil it explicitly. A telling example of this is the figure of the Wandering Jew. From the author's perspective, addressing this figure helps him reflect on his relationship with literature (Pattison, 2002, pos. 1005), which had obvious implications for his existence. From the reader's perspective, approaching the figure of the Wandering Jew is crucial for having a tangible example of the consequences of despair in human existence and for understanding the mental characteristic that most distinguishes the contemporary era (Ballan, 2016, p. 242).

Finally, each mask functions to create a connection between the spiritual and the earthly worlds, so it is necessary to conclude our approach to literary figures by clarifying what kind of relationship is being constructed. For example, we have noticed that in the case of Christ, this figure serves precisely to indicate the path that leads the individual before God, enabling the definitive leap of faith toward a religious way of life. This is an extreme case, as it would be imprudent to attribute this identical function to all the masks in Kierkegaard's work. However, we can take a more measured position by recalling that the figure of Christ is the central axis of Kierkegaard's framework, to the extent that it gives direction to all reflections.

Thus, it is coherent that the other figures do not have the same power to unite the earthly and the spiritual spheres but can contribute to creating the conditions for this to fulfill this purpose. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask how these other masks contribute to this outcome. That said, all the examples we have discussed for our analysis also serve to clarify this point, as the exposition of each has helped specify the contribution to Kierkegaard's plan. On the other hand, this framework can be succinctly summarized in an operational scheme of questions to answer when approaching a literary figure:

Do you use multiple fonts?		
If the answer is positive		
1	From what historical context does Kierkegaard draw the literary figure he is analyzing?	Does the source used change in relation to the problem that Kierkegaard wants to highlight?
		How is this operation justified by Kierkegaard?
2	What is the function of the mask I am analyzing?	What does Kierkegaard want to show through its use? (Emphasize the mutable conditions of the object)
		Both functions must necessarily be fulfilled.
		What does Kierkegaard want to hide by using this mask?
3	What existential implications does this mask have on the writer?	What existential implications does this mask have on the reader?
4	What contribution does the mask make to the connection between the earthly world and the spiritual world?	

Finally, I do not mean to say that the analysis should stop once these questions are answered. Rather, I want to emphasize that they provide the minimum elements necessary to develop a coherent and rigorous hermeneutic exercise of Kierkegaard's literary figures, which could not occur without having solid foundations from which to begin the analysis. Furthermore, I am not implying that there are no other useful elements for the study, but I assert that at the very least, these aspects of each literary figure must be highlighted. It is important to note that these proposals of mine, despite being rigorously supported, do not claim to be exhaustive.

5. A Practical Application of My Methodological Proposal: The Case of Faust

After having engaged in these extensive theoretical reflections, it is appropriate to ground the reasoning by applying it to a specific example. This allows us to appreciate its practical application while attempting to be as concise as possible, so as not to overload the text, harming the nuances each response would require for the analysis to be as precise as possible. Additionally, focusing on a single character allows us to recapture the coherence I had to set aside in my earlier examples, as I chose to present a wide range of cases to highlight various literary figures in Kierkegaard's work and various moments within it, aiming to offer an overarching view of Kierkegaard's trajectory and the role of masks therein. Considering that pseudonyms have been extensively addressed by scholarship, albeit with a biased focus, I will focus here on a literary figure drawn from Western tradition, namely, Faust¹².

What historical context does Kierkegaard draw the literary figure he is analyzing from? Does he use multiple sources? If so, does the source used change in relation to the problem Kierkegaard wishes to highlight? How is this operation justified by Kierkegaard?

Kierkegaard addresses Faust by giving particular importance to Goethe's interpretation of this figure, especially in Part I of his work *Faust*. However, this is not the only source, as he also

¹² I have already addressed this figure in previous works, particularly in Bartoli (2022, pp. 193-219) and recently in Bartoli (2025).

pays close attention to medieval versions and, notably, to contemporary versions produced by Danish and German cultures of his time. In fact, the problem changes in relation to the use of the source. For example, Kierkegaard sometimes relates Faust to seduction and other times to doubt; he justifies this by asserting that each era has its Faust, which represents some relevant characteristics of that historical moment.

What is the function of the mask I am analyzing? a) What does Kierkegaard want to reveal through its use? (Emphasize the mutable conditions of the object.) b) What does Kierkegaard want to conceal with the use of this mask? [Both functions must necessarily be fulfilled.]

Among the various nuances that distinguish Kierkegaard's use of this mask, I focus here on the fact that Kierkegaard employs this figure to reflect on doubt. On one hand, he wants to reveal the range of negative implications that the methodical application of doubt opens up for an individual who seeks to ground their existence on it, without having a religious horizon to turn to for resolving all their uncertainties. On the other hand, Faust serves to illustrate the very necessity of doubt in human existence, while simultaneously concealing the aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment it can induce in each individual, as it contributes to the cultural development of the individual, as demonstrated by the Enlightenment.

What existential implications does this mask have for the writer? What existential implications does this mask have for the reader?

The writer can adopt the mask of Faust to reflect on his existence, troubled by doubts regarding his religious vocation, while also using it to find his path and, consequently, gain hope of finding his place in the world.

From the reader's perspective, the figure of Faust serves as a warning about the risks of living a life entirely anchored in scientific rationality and thus adopting methodical doubt as an existential stance in any situation. Moreover, the despair that seems to dominate Faust can

also serve as a reminder of the need to abandon a similar existential posture to embrace the religious life proposed in other writings by Kierkegaard.

What contribution does the mask make to the connection between the earthly world and the spiritual world?

In this case, the mask of Faust serves to clear the individual's mind of any stance founded solely on rationality and opens up the possibility for them to begin considering the fact that some types of decisions, particularly those related to existence, cannot be based on rational choices but rather require absurd actions, as demonstrated by another literary figure, namely Abraham. This is preparatory for standing before God, as accepting the absurd is a necessary existential prerequisite for making the leap of faith.

This brief example of the practical application of my methodological proposal is sufficient to demonstrate its coherence, as well as the potential developments that could arise from it. Of course, I want to reiterate that this should not be understood as a closed and conclusive analysis; rather, it seeks to provide tools for a rigorous approach to literary figures in Kierkegaard, while simultaneously enabling the extraction of solid analytical elements from them with which to construct the hermeneutic exercise each scholar deems appropriate.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Dialogue

Finally, I would like to emphasize that this study, in addition to the stated objectives, aims to reopen the dialogue on the relevance of studying literary figures in Kierkegaard, either as a topic in its own right or as a methodology for analyzing broader issues, such as the classic questions of anxiety, despair, lifestyles, among others. By reclaiming the hermeneutic ambitions of this work, I hope this is not considered the closing point of a monologue, but rather as the starting part of a conversation with many interlocutors.

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