



## Kierkegaard, Poet of the Word

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Søren Kierkegaard is sometimes regarded as a man obsessed by melancholy. Readers aware of his *Fear and Trembling*, *Sickness unto Death*, and *Concept of Dread* may not have become acquainted with his faith in the loving God revealed in the Scriptures. They may not know that he was filled with a passion to be a poet of the Word who would mediate that Word of love effectively to a “Christendom” deaf to its message.

The sainted Michael Reu of Wartburg Seminary began his explanation of Luther’s *Small Catechism* with the words: “The Bible is a love story.” Søren Kierkegaard had also found the Scriptures to be just that—balm for his troubled soul. Then why such harping on suffering, alienation, torment, struggle, and gloom? Can he rightly be thought of as a poet singing of the love of God in Christ Jesus? Did he really believe God loved him?

The answer, if this portrait has merit, would be that after much struggle Kierkegaard had indeed penetrated to the heart of the Scriptures as a love story, and that he thereafter lived happily as God’s beloved instrument of joy to others “sick unto death.” He pressed on during his last seven years to be a thoroughgoing “imitation of Christ.” This portrait emerges especially in his *Journals* and *Christian Discourses*. It is the portrait of a fulfilled writer who died happy in his mission.

The cost to such an instrument of God, in common with the rest of God’s spokespersons from Moses to the present, would seem inexorably a lifelong *kenosis*. As a poet of the Word his would be the fate of that unhappy man who:

in his heart harbors a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music....And men crowd about the poet and say to him, ‘Sing for us soon again’—which is as much as to say, ‘May new sufferings torment your soul, but may your lips be fashioned as before; for the cries would only distress us, but the music, the music, is delightful.’<sup>1</sup>

However, unlike such an “aesthete” with a martyr-complex, portrayed in the opening pages of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard, like the Christ he wished to emulate, embraced (at the last) his vicarious sufferings for others. He was happy with his

<sup>1</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday, 1959) 1. 19. 294

lot, happy above all at the miracles of love worked by God through God’s chosen instruments.

He, like his Lord, rejoiced at the thought that the deaf might hear again, that here and there, if God provided the “condition” (faith), there would be found a few readers who would understand and appropriate his poetry.

We cannot know whether Kierkegaard would have welcomed without explanation the designation “poet of the Word,” although he often referred to himself as a poet. A poet, as he himself wrote, is one who, however gifted, may actually stand spiritually outside the relationship to God lyrically presented in his writings. Such is the lot of his envious pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes de Silentio sings the praises of Abraham but “cannot make the movements” of faith himself. Kierkegaard wished passionately to be more than a poet. He wanted to press on beyond the “party dress” of poetry to the ranks of authentic believers. He wanted to be filled with the joy and peace of which he sang.

However, in a qualified sense, Kierkegaard knew that he deserved the label of poet to the extent that the designation is reserved for gifted writers whose books have a superbly aesthetic or musical quality. At times he felt almost doomed by his talent, thinking of his intellectual and literary powers as a curse. Even when he tried to be “direct” in his writing, he was hardly less poetic. Never could he leave the indirection of his poetic irony behind. His poetry was permeated with irony, making for the delight of some few readers and the complete confusion of others.

Kierkegaard knew and acknowledged that he was a “master of irony.” Irony is a special tool of those poets who wish to reach the innermost citadel of a few readers—those readers alone who will read between the lines. Kierkegaard wanted to lure these few on into thoughtful reflection and spiritual growth.

Thought and form are in such perfect harmony in *Fear and Trembling* that we are forcibly reminded again of Kierkegaard’s own picture of himself as the poet as enamoured of his sounds as the flute player—when these sounds are pregnant with thought; speaking aloud perhaps a dozen times what he is finally to write down; the poet living through, enjoying, and experiencing the genesis of his thoughts and their search ‘until they found their form.’<sup>2</sup>

Why did his artistry so often take on the form of irony? Beyond its esoteric nature, what does it do? This aspect of his poetry requires special attention.

Irony was woven into everything Kierkegaard wrote, even to the last writings when he wished to be more direct. He used structural irony, the sort that lurks everywhere, even in and especially in his titles. The risk, he well knew—as he also knew that his persistence in the ironic mode was a kind of “daimonea”—was that no one at last would profit from his writing in the manner he hoped for. He felt compelled to use the deliberate ambiguity of irony in order to carry on a secret conversation with the reader, yet cherishing the equally fond hope that the reader would thereby be set free, free from the writer, free to live in his own way “before God.”

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<sup>2</sup>Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970) 17.

Kierkegaard was deeply troubled with his chronic indirection, although he at the same time hoped the style was the right tool to make him an effective poet of the Word. He believed it

was the same style used often by the writers of the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> He believed it was the method employed by Jesus when Jesus partly told, partly hid, the Messianic secret. Kierkegaard knew that the result of his artistry with words would be, especially with the masses, that readers would find themselves outside the words no matter how they yearned to enter. He knew that readers would be like spectators baffled at overhearing lovers quarrel. They would be mystified, like the Ethiopian eunuch, at what they read. The risk would still be worth it if some few would profit by penetrating more deeply the heart of the Scriptures and win, with “passion,” true freedom.

Kierkegaard dedicated his method of poetic irony to the task of letting the Word be the Word in truth, of facilitating the Word’s functioning as the enlivening means of grace God has always intended it to be. He knew that in a complacent “Christendom” such a happy result would only be effected by the grace of God who alone could provide the “condition,” i.e., faith in place of deafness.<sup>4</sup> Most readers, he knew, all his efforts to the contrary and in spite of the luring and teasing implicit in his irony, would read works like *Philosophical Fragments* in the same manner as they read the Bible—complacently, with the illusion that they understood quite well enough the old, old story. Worse yet, they might even trust that they had already themselves “gone further,” surpassing Christianity. Some few, however, might be startled into the awareness, through reading of the magnanimous king and lowly maiden, that it is of the utmost importance to think of the Scriptures as a love story not yet appropriated, an old story whose pathos and wonder they had not yet begun to plumb. They might even come to realize that they, like Kierkegaard, were also engaged in a lifelong lover’s quarrel with God, a quarrel that no one—Kierkegaard included himself in this “no one”—can ever fully appreciate.

Many a commentator has pointed out the contrasts between the three categories of Kierkegaard’s literature—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. They subdivide the religious into religion A and religion B. The aesthetic material, they note, was attributed by Kierkegaard to pseudonymous authors. It abounded in the use of irony. The authors, they remark, were all curiously skewed in their approach to life, and the material was skewed as well. The portraits drawn are sometimes vignettes of people who seem to live exuberantly, like Don Juan, but who miss out on truly living at all. The ethical material, by this analysis, depicts a higher stage of spiritual development. At least the people now depicted decide to come to terms with the making of moral choices. The authors are humorless moralists. They sometimes solemnly counsel characters locked into the aesthetic stage. Finally, religion A is described as confident religiosity, religion B as deep contrition.

There is value in these generalizations about the categories. However, Kierkegaard was careful to point out that life, including his own, is never lived out neatly according to one category. In a sense the categories are non-liveable

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<sup>3</sup>*Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (6 vols.; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1978) 5.#6076.417.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, #5987.372: “...Christianity needed a maieutic.”

ideal types, useful mainly for instruction. Actual life is lived out as some sort of mixing or balancing of the various stances to the end of our days. He also pointed out that human beings do not automatically progress from the lower to the higher stages as they grow older, becoming gradually more spiritual in the process.

There is another hazard in the sketchy analysis, however. Some of these same commentators suggest that when Kierkegaard presents religion B under his own name he is leaving behind completely the use of poetic irony and now writes “directly.” They suggest further that it is of first importance to unmask the real Kierkegaard, and that the point of reading him is in fact just that.. How ironic!<sup>5</sup> He remarked that with scholarly friends like these, who needs enemies?

Benefits can abound for readers of Kierkegaard who are watchful for pitfalls set by the experts. It is surely important that readers be willing to wrestle themselves with his meaning without undue reliance on commentators. Surely benefits are more likely also for those willing to heed Kierkegaard’s counsel to give up the task of unmasking his inner life. He wrote often of his irritation with those who wished to penetrate his “secret.” He was irritated with Bible societies who set as their primary goal the quantitative distribution of the Scriptures. He also ranted against parsons. All these—the prurient, the publishers, and the preachers—in common divert attention from the *sine qua non*, the need for “passion.” They worsen deafness to the Word. They distract from the real problem that must be dealt with before anyone can benefit from the love story in the Scriptures.

The irritation must not be misread. Kierkegaard wanted almost to the end to become a parson himself. He wanted folk to read the Word. He valued preaching. He wanted his readers to be led into the Word. He loved the Scriptures. Quotations from and meditations upon the Scriptures permeated his thinking and his writing. The Bible was a primary resource for most of his writing, not only for religious meditations in *Edifying Discourses* but for his aesthetic and ethical material as well. The reader who does not keep in mind Kierkegaard’s use of structural irony can be totally misled by *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here Johannes Climacus, the pseudonym who yearns to get inside Christianity but remains an outsider, tries at least to get at the truth of what is required to become a Christian. Johannes makes astounding assertions; that it is better to worship an idol with passion than the true God complacently, and that the Scriptures can be collapsed into the one thought: that God has entered time. These radical assertions surpass those of the higher critic Bruno Lessing. Was Kierkegaard himself, putting these words into the mouth of Johannes Climacus, avowing that, as far as he was concerned, all the rest of the Scriptures is superfluous, and that one religion is as good as another? Hardly.

What then was Kierkegaard’s frustration and concern? Surely it was the failure of his readers, the parsons, and the Bible—multipliers to understand the real problem. The real problem is hearing. It is our deafness to what we hear and read. Our task is not to unmask secrets. Our task is not complete with memorization of the Scriptures. Our task is not to buy into the cheapening of

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 3. #2550. 99-101.

grace from the pulpit. Our task is enormous: it is to benefit from what we read, to hear what is preached, and to see God’s Christ.

Kierkegaard was convinced that Hegel had been influential in misleading many among the thinking and reading folk of Denmark. He had also misled many of the most prominent pulpiteers, even bishops. Hegel had urged Christians to “go beyond” Christianity. To make such an accomplishment seem possible, Hegel, according to Kierkegaard, first had to cheapen the

requirements for becoming a Christian. The bishops proclaimed widely the notion of Denmark as “Christendom,” a domain in which Christ reigns in every heart from baptism until death. The notion of such automatic status in the Kingdom of God, Kierkegaard testified, guaranteed a general complacency. Alienation from the true Word was compounded, he insisted, by lusty singing of Grundtvig’s hymns of assurance. The cure? Some instrument of God like himself, using irony, humor, metaphor, pseudonyms, and teasing, would have to wage war upon the complacent. Someone ready for suffering, vicarious suffering, would have to reach hearers of the Word “from behind,” using whatever stratagems would help in overcoming deafness to the Word.<sup>6</sup>

Mere quoting of the Scriptures would not suffice, although the range of Kierkegaard’s references to the Bible is impressive. In the *Journals* alone he referred to almost every Book of the Bible, alluding some two hundred fifty times to the Old Testament and three times more often to the New. Very often, and deliberately, he quoted familiar passages. Yet as a poet of the Word he did more. He did what poets do. Poetry is literally a creative “doing” or “making” or “bringing into being.” Just that is what Kierkegaard did with the Word. He presented to his readers the old words in a new way, and sometimes indeed with startling impact.

His obvious preference was for Bible stories involving crushing demands on the believer. He was deliberately rebuffing a culture wishing to “go beyond” the heroes of the faith. He himself identified two passages as his favorites. The first is usually read as stern law, the demand to choose one Master (Matt 6:24); the second is usually read as sweet gospel, the verses on the “father of lights” (James 1:17~21). But to Kierkegaard both passages are gospel; both are words from the unchanging Lover of humankind seeking purity of heart.

He favored the New Testament over the Old. He considered the Old Testament a sad tale of broken covenant and triumphalist expectations. He said the Old Testament used a different set of categories, therefore, from the New.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he found the ultimate message of both Testaments to be the same. Both unfolded the heart of Scripture, that mystery beyond human ken: suffering as God’s good gift to humankind. What had alienated him from Scripture since youth was a picture of a gruesomely suffering Christ, a picture purposely inserted into a group of other pictures shown him by his father. The youth was deeply troubled. How could men treat a good man so? How could this youth believe that his gloomy father loved him, when the father heaped upon him his own obsession about having committed the unforgivable sin?<sup>8</sup> How could

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 6. #6943. 553-555: “...power I will use...is laughter.”

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 2. #2222. 506-508; 2. #2225. 509-510; 3. #3098. 411-412; 1. #436. 174; 1. #206. 84.

<sup>8</sup>Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University, 1938) 1.39-56; 2.463-466.

Kierkegaard the youth believe the Scriptures to be a story of Fatherly love when the heavenly Father sends His son to the cross? Years passed before he learned to read the Scriptures rightly. Only when he had plumbed the depths of the meaning of love in linkage with suffering could he arrive at a diagnosis and cure of his melancholy.

Kierkegaard did not assume when he finally came to terms with suffering that the Scriptures were now open to him alone and closed to all others. On the contrary, he thought of himself as an aggravated lifelong case of deafness to the wonder of God’s wooing. The first progress in his understanding came, he said, at the time of his “third conversion,” at Eastertime

1848, seven years before his death. From then on his chronic melancholy would still give him dark hours, since “no one truly knows he is that much loved by God,” but the “thorn in the flesh” had been in principle removed. The illuminating discovery he had made with the help of the Holy Spirit was that suffering and the experiencing of grace are inseparably one, supremely so in the Christ Event, but also so in the case of all who learn to read the Scriptures rightly.

Even sublime discourses like *Purity of Heart* were regarded by Kierkegaard as still religion A, far as yet from the heart of the Scriptures. He called them merely preparatory exercises for the receiving of the gospel, anticipatory studies in patience in contrast to religion B. Only when one has attained at least to a glimpse of the latter with its dimension of depth does the reader of the Scriptures appropriate the freeing truth that before God he or she is “always in the wrong.” What frees the reader is that then, and then alone, is there a readiness to float on wings of grace; only then does the reader know that the experiencing of the travail is itself God’s best gift to him or her.

There are attendant problems with such single-mindedness. Daniel Day Williams has pointed out fairly that Kierkegaard, in order to focus undeviatingly on the difficulties inherent in “willing one thing,” neglected the supportive role of the Holy Spirit and the believing community.<sup>9</sup> Williams did not conclude, as have others, that Kierkegaard was not a Christian, even perhaps mad. Williams recognized that Kierkegaard’s was an authentic passion to know his Lord, in the only way Kierkegaard believed efficacious: we must be beside our Lord on the cross. Søren believed that the sufferings of the servants of God must increase the closer they draw to the Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The unrelieved sufferings of Kierkegaard are legendary. His alienation from his bitter father and his broken engagement with Regina are but two of a host of troubles. The miracle is that he did win through to “repetition,” to joy before God in the routines of daily life. He said that God’s choice of him as a paradigm of suffering was like a master cook’s choice of a dash of cinnamon to spice up a bland dish.<sup>11</sup> The bland dish was Christendom. Kierkegaard had learned to explore a mystery few have plumbed, a secret reserved for the lover who must go to hell and back for the sake of the beloved.<sup>12</sup> When he tells the agonies of his own odyssey he seems to wish to offend and discourage the

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<sup>9</sup>Daniel Day Williams, *God’s Grace and Man’s Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949) 119-126.

<sup>10</sup>*Kierkegaard’s Journals*, 4. #4682. 408-409; 1. #342. 143; 4. #4701. 425-426; 5. #6001. 377-378.

<sup>11</sup>*Kierkegaard’s Journals*, 1. #709. 331-332.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 5. #5640. 224-225.

reader. He poetizes such stories as those of Abraham and Isaac at Moriah with such horror that the reader is repelled at the “hatred” in the father’s face as he lifts the knife. He parodies the Regina affair in his monstrous “Diary of a Seducer” until even his “editor” cannot bear to look upon the poem. What is gained from description of such descents into hell?

Apparently Kierkegaard wished readers of the Scriptures to read the old story of the Christ becoming sin as a shocking yet wonderful new story. He used the imagery of the mother who must blacken her breast in order to wean her beloved child. The experience is traumatic for her and for the child, yet good. Moriah was traumatic for Abraham and for Isaac. The loss of Regina was traumatic for both lovers. Kierkegaard believed that every reader of the Scriptures

must make the difficult trip—to hell and back, into the bleak experiencing of “passion,” into the agonizing of spirit on the road toward “subjectivity.” The good, the goal: union with Christ.

Kierkegaard’s writing is socratic midwifery at work. Each reader must go through the birthpangs of having his or her own thought-child. Jesus used similar imagery to express the travail of experiencing doubt (John 16:21). Yet it is an act of generosity on the part of the one who is an “occasion” for spiritual growth on the part of another to let the beloved other person wrestle with his or her own travail in seeking to understand. Kierkegaard called it “resignation,” an act of generous self-sacrifice when an author is willing to relinquish power over the reader. It is an act of love to refuse to be an impediment to another’s odyssey toward freedom:

the highest degree of resignation that a human being can reach is to acknowledge the given independence in every man, and after the measure of his ability do all that in truth be done to help someone preserve it.<sup>13</sup>

Only God can do more than such a human “occasion.” Only God can work within the sinner the “condition” for hearing (faith); yet he too does not bludgeon but woos gently. The hoped-for providential result of the midwifery is ongoing generations of “occasions” who will in love help others in turn preserve their integrity similarly as each soul comes to terms with his or her own subjectivity in his or her own way.

A different portrait of Kierkegaard emerges in his writings from 1848 on. Before Holy Week that year he had played the role of a “knight of resignation,” admiring the faith of others like Abraham but without the joy of faith himself. He was not yet a “knight of faith.” Now he held together his consciousness of God and his consciousness of suffering until he was at last sure that God had removed his melancholy by enabling him to reconcile the two: suffering and God, crucifixion and Word of joy. The moment of truth and of peace of soul was reached when he became convinced that God had more than forgiven him, that God had in fact *forgotten* his past wavering in doubts and self-pity, that God, as M. Reu expressed it in his *Dogmatics*, had “covered” his sin. This forgetting, Kierkegaard believed, was God’s own most sublime poetry. Poetry becomes here truly a “re-creation.” Kierkegaard called God’s forgetting as much a

<sup>13</sup>Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1944) 232-233.

miracle as God’s creating of the world out of nothing. For forgetting was God’s un-creating of his sin. It was God’s truly freeing action.<sup>14</sup>

From 1848 on, with occasional lapses, Kierkegaard began to celebrate God’s forgetting. He entitled his new meditations on Scripture *Christian Discourses* in order to testify that at last he was making progress toward life “before God.” He spoke frequently of “repeating for the first time,”<sup>15</sup> that is, of knowing at last what he had never known, the spontaneity of youth as God’s beloved child. He wrote of “the self grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it,” using the imagery of saints in stained glass made radiant as heaven’s light passes through the window.<sup>16</sup> He used the word “solidarity,” a term for the experiencing of oneness with God in suffering, as well as his oneness with all “the common folk” (not the “masses”) who in their common life find joy in the midst of travail.<sup>17</sup> He wrote frequently of the Beatitudes as the marching song of the faithful.

Kierkegaard had found Hegel's dialectical writing tedious. He ridiculed it, especially those passages where Hegel portrayed cultures *en masse* moving through stages of thesis and antithesis to higher plateaus of spirituality on the way to the highest stage, beyond Christianity, of rational freedom. He protested that "The Individual" must experience an "Instant" or moment of truth. However, sometimes in parody and intentional irony, yet with earnest intent, he mimicked Hegel's style. He even found helpful Hegel's imagery of the process by which a human being's quality of desiring is ennobled by the lure of another's purer desiring. He transformed Hegel's imagery into that of the lure of the Kingdom, the lure of the Christ whose desire is union with sinners.

He wrote lyrical passages—at the end himself a believing poet—about God's sublime poetry that is more than poetry, since it is salvific poetry that confers with the reading the condition for reading. It is poetry that enables the sinner to embrace suffering in imitation of Christ. He testified that at the end of his life he who had been "always in the wrong" had begun to fly, that he had been made "light by grace." He testified that all the while any person despairingly seeks God, the Lord has already found that person, and in fact has never been absent:

Thou dost not remain, like the spring, in a single place, but Thou dost follow the traveller on his way....a spring that itself seeks out the thirsty traveller, the errant wanderer.<sup>18</sup>

At last the suffering self becomes truly a self before God. He or she does not go beyond Christianity. No one can. The self is lifted through grace with joy as though supplied with wings, singing an unending Hallelujah, being happy before God like the obedient birds and flowers, hearing the glorious music of a redeemed humanity as portrayed in the Book of Revelation, music that had

<sup>14</sup>*Kierkegaard's Journals*, 2. #1224. 52-53.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 5. #6135.446-447. Also, Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1960) 190, footnote 2.

<sup>16</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955) 262.

<sup>17</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses* (New York: Oxford University, Galaxy, 1961) 110.

<sup>18</sup>*Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Modern Library, 1946) 481-482.

before been cacophonous. Such a person knows now the unifying message of the Scriptures, Old and New. The music is lovelier because underneath the sopranos is the basso continuo refrain supplied by the suffering ones: "God is love."<sup>19</sup>

This sublime treatment of Biblical themes of joy in vicarious suffering is Kierkegaard's way, as merely an occasion, of helping the Scriptures sing again their age-old song of God's love. Even though his last seven years were the most polemical of his life, it seems apparent from his neglected *Journals* and *Christian Discourses* that these are the writings of a man who had himself found healing and joy in the greatest of love stories, the Word of God, and wished only that others might find it too. They are an enduring gift from one who yearned, as a servant of the Word, not for our final favorable verdict on the authenticity of his faith, but for our own "solidarity" with God through the Word.

<sup>19</sup>*Kierkegaard's Journals*, 1. #709. 331-332.