

# Representing Love: From Poetry to Martyrdom

or

## Language and Transcendence in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*

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### 1. *Works of Love* and the meaning of »the Christian«

The aesthetic and the religious, poetry and Christianity, are inextricably yet antagonistically intertwined from the beginning to the end of Kierkegaard's authorship. How – despite all Kierkegaard's polemics – are we to understand their continuing compulsive affinity in his work? And is that affinity of such a kind that we are able to find a positive element in their relationship, so that, for example, we could speak of a progression from the poetic to the religious, or of a presence of the religious in the poetic, or, even, of the poetic in the religious? And could we do so in a way that would be true to Kierkegaard's own essential thought?

If we once begin to ponder such questions, it will probably soon strike us that, for Kierkegaard, poetry and religion, poetry and the Christian life, are characteristically viewed as forms of communication. Poetry, the poetic, is not simply a matter of literary form, nor yet a life-style (as in the Romantic cult of the poet), nor yet a certain psychological state, although Kierkegaard shows us how it may involve all of these. But there is also, crucially, a poetic way of *communicating*. And the same is true of Christianity. Christianity may be defined by dogma or be seen in terms of a certain sort of subjective state of mind or feeling. Whichever way we look at it, however, Christianity is, for Kierkegaard, inseparable from the *communicative act* of bearing witness to Christ »the sign of contradiction.«

Putting it like this, however, may seem to draw the poetic and the Christian together, only in order the more violently to thrust them

apart. For doesn't the Christian witness depend precisely on the transcendent act of God in Incarnation, i.e. isn't it only on the basis of what God does, and not on any purely human, immanent possibility that Christian faith and thus Christian witness first becomes possible?

There are certainly texts that may seem and perhaps actually do support that claim. But here as elsewhere we must be sensitive to the multi-voiced and many-layered nature of Kierkegaard's writing. Kierkegaard does not do the work of interpretation for us, and we do not understand him merely by summoning up proof texts. Rather, we have to search for those perspectives that give us the largest view on the authorship as a whole – and, of course, we have to evaluate what we see in those perspectives in the light of our own understanding of the matter in question. In other words, we not only ask »What did Kierkegaard have to say?« but also »Does what Kierkegaard said help us to a better understanding of (in this case) the relation of the poetic to Christian existence in the world?« And, in asking this, we must remember that, for Kierkegaard, the poetic stands for the *humanum* in general so that our question is then, simply, »What is the relation of the human to the Christian?«

These questions are central to *Works of Love*, a text that is pivotal in the overall architectonic of Kierkegaard's authorship. Written at the midpoint of his literary career, after the conclusion of the pseudonymous authorship and before the development of the radical Christianity of *Training in Christianity*, *The Sickness unto Death*, and the *Attack on Christendom*, *Works of Love* offers both retrospective and prospective views across Kierkegaard's work. As a text it is itself both edifying and Christian, thereby compromising the radical cleavage between immanence and transcendence that Kierkegaard himself claims to be so essential, and that he aligns with the distinction between the edifying and the Christian. It is, for example, striking that whilst the text often seems to call for a rigour in the implementation of the commandment to love, a rigour that requires us to put aside all preferential loves and friendships, and that reflects the divine origin of the commandment, Kierkegaard frequently illustrates his argument by depicting universally human situations such as the care of young children. The moral and spiritual way propounded in *Works of Love* is infinitely demanding – and yet it is understandable to all. But, then again, the book culminates in a sketch of suffering witness to the crucified one that is not surpassed by anything in the subsequent works, not even in those by the »higher« pseudonyms.<sup>1</sup>

So, then, with *Works of Love* as our text, is there anything, and if so

what is it, in the *humanum* that could act as the foundation for the communicative act of bearing-witness in the radical sense of the term used in Kierkegaard's later writings? Can we see bearing-witness not simply as a response to revelation coming »vertically from above« but as the realisation of a human possibility?

## 2. The Language of Love

A first clue seems to have been provided in what has already been said, namely, that bearing-witness is an act of communication. Now, it is clear that language has a central place amongst human communicative practices. Is there then anything in language itself that establishes the possibility of bearing-witness in the radical Christian sense?

When people use language in order to speak to each other they typically imagine themselves as speaking »about« something. But if language is »about« something then we shall need to keep that »about« in mind as we consider language, and we should not abstract language from this intentionality – an intentionality that, for Kierkegaard, finds its consummation in bearing-witness.

But if we are to speak about language, where should we begin? Language comes in so many different forms and seems to perform so many different functions? Is there any particular domain or use of language to which we can turn in order to bring to the fore its intrinsic orientation towards bearing-witness?

If we looked to the language of science, of physics or biology perhaps, we would doubtless learn many interesting things. But we would be making life hard for ourselves. In any case, these are perhaps rarefied and specialised examples of language use, examples that obscure the character of the language that we actually use in everyday life, »real« language, as it were.

If, instead, we were to turn to poetry, we might again be accused of appealing to a very specialised kind of language. But is that so? Kierkegaard would seem to think not, for although he recognises that the average person is not a poet, he takes the poet and the poetic as representative of the normal universal human consciousness. How can this be? Well, let us think for a moment about what it is the poet speaks, writes or thinks about.

At one level, we might say that the poet writes about anything and everything. If we buy an anthology of poetry we might find poems

about landscapes, food, history, class struggle or poems that simply want to make us laugh. But can we argue with Kierkegaard in claiming, as he claims in *Works of Love*, that the most characteristic theme of poetry is: love. And »love« is no specialist topic or field. Love – and for now I deliberately shelter behind the ambiguity of the English word – is, or can be, of concern to all, whether they are in love or out of it, innocent of it or experienced in all its ways.

But isn't it precisely the poet and the poet's way of talking about love that Kierkegaard says are excluded by and contrary to Christianity? Here in *Works of Love*, for example, he establishes as a test of the genuineness of Christianity how it relates to the poet, since the poet, and especially the poet's way of speaking about love is, Kierkegaard claims, precisely the opposite of Christianity's way – a distinction that Kierkegaard defines by the words *elskov* (cf. the Greek *eros*) and *kjærlighed* (cf. the Greek *agape*) respectively.

Nevertheless, a negative relationship is not a non-relationship. The poet is of concern to Christianity precisely because the poet's claim is to be the one who best, most fittingly, most truly, speaks of love. But that is also the claim of Christianity. Therefore the collision between them is inevitable and necessary. Nor can we avoid it (and nor does Kierkegaard seek to avoid it) simply by marking out two domains in which each enjoys its proprietorial rights undisturbed by the other – the poet being allowed to speak best of *elskov*, the Christian to speak best of *kjærlighed*. For this distinction itself provokes the further question: which is the better word for love? Surely at some level they must be in competition about the same thing, for if the loves of which they speak are simply unconnected then it is hard to see how the quarrel between them can be so bitter. But, *Nota Bene*, the issue is not just about love, about the nature of love, but about how best to speak of love. *Works of Love*, I suggest, is not to be read in the first instance as Kierkegaard's »ethics,« still less his »politics,« but an attempt to answer just this question: how best to speak of love?

That there is something intrinsically problematic in speaking about love is signalled already in the short preface, repeated at the beginning of Part II. Kierkegaard immediately emphasises that he is not expecting to talk about or to describe all of love's works. For the subject-matter of the book, the works of love, is »essentially inexhaustible« in such a way that even the smallest example, the least work of love of all, is also »essentially indescribable, precisely because it is essentially present in its entirety

everywhere, and essentially not there to be described.«<sup>2</sup> I shall not attempt the further elucidation of these remarks here, but simply note their function in alerting us to the difficulty of properly addressing the matter in hand. Whatever is going to be said, no matter how much is said, is destined to prove inadequate.

This difficulty is further underlined when we turn to the prayer which immediately follows. »How should we talk properly about love, if you were forgotten, you God of love, from whom is all love in heaven and on earth (...)*« (SV3 14, 10: WL 3).*<sup>3</sup>

How, then, to speak properly of love?

The first discourse »Love's hidden life and its being known by its fruits« focuses on the difficulties involved in answering this question by examining the issue of deception, i.e. the possibility that we may be deceived about love and, for example, call selfishness or infatuation by the name of »love.«

The discourse takes its overall theme from Luke 6.44 »Every tree is known by its own fruits, for one does not gather figs from thorns, or pluck grapes from thorn bushes.« But the problem is how to recognise what love's own fruits »are,« i.e., what are grapes and what are thorn-bushes. For there is a certain sense in which love is by its nature »concealed,« »*i det skjulte.*« Love is not visible to the sensuous eye, but, in an allusion to Proverbs 4.23, Kierkegaard states that its life flows from the heart, the heart that is hidden like the secret source of the lake, or as is God, hidden by the radiance of His own luminosity. Indeed, human love is itself hidden in the innermost depths, beyond all grounds, groundlessly connected with the whole of existence because it is rooted and grounded in God, and in God's groundless love. However – therefore – precisely this means that the source of love is unknowable. It is only »by their fruits [that] you shall know« what are works of love. With reference to 1 John 3.18 (»Let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth«) Kierkegaard emphasises that the fruits of love are deeds. Words alone are mere »leaves« and, if we feed ourselves on the leaves, not only will we not be nourished but we will prevent the fruits from appearing. Words about love, then, are not merely potentially misleading, but can be actively harmful.

Words are ambiguous. The same word that is used in one person's mouth is »blessed and nourishing grain,« is, in the mouth of another, an alluring but fruitless externality (SV3 14, 17; WL 12). The difference not only depends on whether the word is matched by a corresponding

deed, however, but on whether it proceeds from a resolute heart. »There is no word in human language, not a single one, not the holiest, of which we can say: if a man uses this word, then it is thereby unconditionally proved that he has love within him. On the contrary, it is even thus: that a word spoken by one man can assure us that there is love in him, and the opposite word spoken by another can assure us that equally there is love in him: it is so that one and the same word can assure us that love dwells in the one who spoke it, and not in another who nevertheless spoke the same word« (SV3 14, 18-19; WL 13). All depends on how the word is said »and above all how it is intended« (SV3 14, 19; WL 14).

Everything, then, would seem to depend on the singular context in which the word is spoken, and on the singular heart, the singular intention with which it is spoken. But, Kierkegaard adds, the point of this discussion is not in order that we might learn a technique for testing the truth or falsity of talk about love, so that we might the better judge one another, but to hear the biblical word under the rubric »Thou art the man,« i.e., to become concerned about the state of our own heart, our own intentions, and about whether our own words are truly words of love.

If the first discourse of Part I is extensively concerned with language, so too is the first discourse of Part II, »Love Builds Up.« The connection between the two is confirmed by the passage echoing »there is no word ...« section of the earlier discourse, only now it is not »love« that is the subject of reflection but upbuilding. Like love upbuilding is said to have the characteristic that »it can give itself in all and be co-present in all« (SV3 14, 206; WL 212). Therefore, »there is no word in language that is in and for itself upbuilding, and there is no word in language that cannot be said to be edifying and have an upbuilding effect if love is present« (SV3 14, 206; WL 213).

So, not only does this discourse present a general picture of the co-implication and reciprocity of love and the upbuilding, it also presents them as having a common relation to language.

Before going on to comment further on this, however, it is worth noting the importance of this linkage for the larger understanding of religiousness in Kierkegaard. Generally in Kierkegaard's authorship the upbuilding is presented as a category within the possibilities of the *humanum*. Thus the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* occupy a place quite distinctly both from that of the paradoxical faith of Religiousness B, and also from the radical discipleship promoted by Kierkegaard's later writ-

ings. In *Works of Love* it might seem as if the decisively Christian element were present from the beginning – recall the Trinitarian prayer that prefaces the discourses that make it up. Here, however, we see that within what looks like a transcendently determined context, the human possibility of upbuilding is being reaffirmed. Now it might be objected that »the upbuilding« is being used here in a different sense from that of the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, a sense that is only possible on the basis of a transcendently grounded command, on revelation, and on faith. However, it is striking that the examples of »the upbuilding« to which Kierkegaard appeals are very mundane, very human: the large family forced to share a small apartment who nevertheless manage to create a »hyggelig,« homely, atmosphere (and what is more »merely human« than »hyggelighed«?), thereby showing the reality of the love they have for one another.

However, a more decisive pointer to the understanding of love as a human possibility is found in the discussion of language found in the same discourse.

The discourse opens with a striking claim that »All human discourse, even the divinely spiritual discourse of Holy Scripture is essentially metaphorical («overført») discourse« (SV3 14, 203; WL 209). How does Kierkegaard justify this claim?

He does so by playing on the literal meaning of the term »over-ført,« namely »carried over,« »trans-ferred« (cf. »meta-phor«). The metaphorical nature of language, he argues, is grounded in the constitution of the human subject. From the moment of birth every human being is to be regarded as a spiritual being, as »Aand« (meaning Spirit, cf. German »Geist«). However, it is only sometime after that that the individual actually becomes conscious of themselves as Spirit. This consciousness is therefore preceded by a period in which life is experienced in a primarily sensuous-soulish way. But Spirit is not opposed to the sensuous-soulish. Rather, it supervenes upon it. What happens in such supervenience is that the sensuous-soulish period or aspect of life is »taken over« by Spirit and »so used, so grounded that it becomes the trans-ferred (i.e. the metaphorical)« (SV3 14, 203; WL 209).

Kierkegaard's argument can be summarised thus: The phenomenon of human language relies upon its material embeddedness in the sensuous. The time, space, audibility and visibility of language belong to this sensuous dimension, without which it just doesn't exist. But this means that it is possible to use language in a purely sensuous way, without un-

derstanding its spiritual meaning. The sensuous person and the spiritual person can both say the same thing – but mean quite different things by it. Nor does this have to be a moral distinction. We might think simply of the infant who learns a poem parrot-fashion and the adult who understands what it means. Precisely because Spirit is not sensuous, and because language must always occupy a determinate place within the dimension of the sensuous, Spirit has no special language of its own. »Because Spirit is invisible, so then its language is a secret one, and the secret consists precisely in this: that it uses the same words as the child or simple person, but uses them in a transferred sense, metaphorically (...)« (SV3 14, 203; WL 209–10).

This is how Scripture proceeds, and it is exemplified by the »word« under consideration, namely to edify, to build up, a word which has a powerful »physical« meaning, belonging to the world of bricks and mortar and manual labour, but which is spiritual, invested with a paradoxical and inverted meaning in scripture, as Kierkegaard goes on to show.

At this point some interesting possibilities, questions and connections begin to open up.

For example: the inexpressibility and hiddenness of love (as discussed in the first discourse) need not immediately be taken as proof that love is only possible on the basis of a divine act, since the line between the visible and the invisible world is not being drawn between the divine and the human but within the human itself, between the sensuous and the spiritual, a line that is simultaneously constituted by and concealed in the phenomenon of language. Thus, whereas the first discourse seemed to say that love was »beyond« language because it was a matter of the heart or of the intention, we can now see that such a doubling between what is manifest or sensuously visible and what is hidden belongs to language itself. Language is not simply identical with its sensuous phenomenality, as the first discourse might suggest, but is most properly itself when this sensuous phenomenality becomes the vehicle of spiritual meaning. The dialectic of love and its fruits is thus analogous to the dialectic of language and its expressiveness.

To go further: if to speak rightly of love is to speak in accordance with love's inner meaning, the intention of the heart, the Spirit, is this anything substantially different from, simply, speaking rightly, i.e., speaking in such a way that language becomes a medium of spiritual expression and understanding. To speak rightly is to create or to confirm in, with, and under the sensuous externality of language, the community of



Spirit with Spirit, to build up the spiritual community – and what is this but to live in love?

And yet, at the same time, the very sense structure of language establishes the possibility of irony. For the fact that a word does not qua word, determine its own meaning, the gap between word and meaning that is built in to the very structure of language, means that a word can not only be spoken parrot-fashion, without understanding, but it can be spoken with a meaning that is intentionally different from its sensuous meaning – and there is no technique, no method for telling whether the speaker is »really« in his words, if, that is, his heart is in it. Here, then, is the possibility of a constant confusion between irony and love, a possibility that is exploited so well («well« in his own terms, at least) by the Seducer. He too, of course, speaks »words of love,« but whether he »really« means them cannot be decided by the words themselves. In contrast to Don Juan, who deceives through the sheer immediacy of his sensuous presence, words themselves provide him with the means of deceiving. But perhaps also of being deceived since, as the opening paragraph of *Works of Love* emphasises, to be deceived about love is the most dangerous thing of all, and we are always deceived when we fail to speak rightly about love.

Now the picture of language we have developed up to this point is a somewhat static one, resting as it does on the division between inner and outer, Spirit and sensuousness. This may seem like yet another case of what Nietzsche called Christianity's reworking of Platonism for the people. Kierkegaard is, however, to offer us a view onto a further, no less essential dimension of language: time.

To see this, we turn to the discourse »Love Hopes All – and yet is Never Put to Shame.« Here Kierkegaard is concerned about what he calls the figurative (*«billedlig»*) nature of Christian discourse, and he suggests that it is precisely by means of its figurative language that Scripture gives a sense of »festivity and solemnity« to earthly existence. Nor is Scripture ashamed to use such language of the Eternal itself, as when it speaks of earthly life as the time of sowing and eternity as the time of harvest (*SV3* 14, 238; *WL* 247).

What is Kierkegaard saying here? I suggest that we may paraphrase him by saying that the answer to the question as to how to speak rightly of love can only be given eschatologically, in the time of harvest. But in the light of what we have learned about the relationship between Spirit and sensuousness, this means that the spiritual aspect of language is not

available as something present here-and-now, »behind« the surface of sensuous manifestation, as it were. The fullness of meaning belongs to a time that is not our time, an absolute future, the eschaton. And this means that, this side of the eschaton, the end that cannot be anticipated by human judgment, all meaning is in a state of indeterminacy. This comment is confirmed by Kierkegaard's use of the image of dictation (*SV3* 14, 242; *WL* 252). In relation to God, he suggests, we should be like a person taking dictation, trans-ferring into our language only what God speaks to us. At first this seems to imply the heteronomous character of the religious relationship, and to be a way of guaranteeing the »correctness« of what the person taking the dictation produces. But that is not how Kierkegaard uses it here. His point is rather precisely to do with the open-endedness of language, since the person taking the dictation cannot, he says, put in the final full-stop until the full meaning of what is being said has been uttered (*SV3* 14, 242; *WL* 252). But this side of the eschaton, it isn't. Importantly, the impossibility of closure is in this regard intimately connected with the relational, social character of language. For it is not just a matter of our own separate attempts to speak rightly about love, according to what we hear in the divine dictation. Crucially, Kierkegaard points to the situation that what we hope on behalf of others, whether we give a generous and hopeful interpretation to the words of others, is integral to our being able to »mean« our own words of love, and, if I am correct, »mean« anything at all (*SV3* 14, 246-247; *WL* 256).

### 3. From Saying to Praising: Bearing Witness

I come to the last discourse in the collection: »The Work of Love in Praising Love.« This begins with what is said to be a proverbial saying – »There is no art in saying something: the point is to do it« (*SV3* 14, 342; *WL* 359). This poses a challenge to anyone who wants to say something about love. For isn't anything we might say about love infinitely less important than actually doing something about it, actually loving?

Praising love, however, is not a mere saying, but, Kierkegaard suggests, is itself a doing. As the title of the discourse implies it is a »work of love« when it is done rightly, and Kierkegaard offers several rules by which we can do this.

The first is that the one who is to praise love must do so in the spirit of self-denial. The way to achieve this is by learning to think a single

thought, which, as Kierkegaard explains it, means not to think the meaning of one's thought by projecting it onto its object or supposed object in the external, sensuous world, but to become transparent to oneself in the thinking of it. Kierkegaard's thought and his manner of expressing it grow extremely dense at this point. And it is little wonder that he suddenly breaks off and exclaims »Oh! I do not know with whom I am talking about this, or whether there is anyone who concerns themselves with such things at all!« (SV3 14, 345; WL 362). Then he alludes to a quotation from Herder, noted some years previously in the notebooks. – »»Write!« »For whom shall I write?« »For the departed, for those whom you loved in times past!« »But whereas the quotation as originally noted down continues« »Will they read me?« »Yes, for they will return as posterity!«,« Kierkegaard now supplies a new ending of his own: »And in loving them I shall also meet together with the dearest among my contemporaries« (SV3 14, 345; WL 362).

Now, if we allow ourselves to hear in this new version the pathos of the original dialogue, we will find ourselves able to see the inner connection between two key elements: firstly, the eschatological dimension of meaning, refracted through what Kierkegaard has earlier called »the work of love in remembering the dead,« since the fulfilment of meaning in what is to be written is said to depend on the future restoration of relationship with those who are, for now, dead, lost to us; secondly, that genuine meaning, really meaning what we say, is inseparable from the building up of a contemporary community of love. For the one who intends eschatological restitution *and* the creation of a contemporary community of love, praising love is a work of love.

The second rule for praising love aright is that the one who does so does it in sacrificial disinterestedness. Here the relation to the contemporaries is carried forward and emphasised. However, as Kierkegaard develops the point, disinterestedness in relation to the contemporaries will mean making oneself, the speaker, repulsive to them. The speaker must appear to others as a selfish person, and his speech must seem to them unlovable. Only so can he be sure that he is not secretly aiming at some personal benefit for being the poet of love. In fact, such a one will be hated by the world and in conflict with it. Nevertheless, they will be sustained by the hope that if the message is incomprehensible and paradoxical to those to whom it is addressed, the speaker is continually »before God,« is seen by God and understood by God.

Such a one is, for example, an apostle, who, as Kierkegaard goes on

to say (and as Paul said of himself), speaks »not as pleasing men, but God (...) neither (...) used we flattering words, nor a cloak of covetousness (...) Nor of men sought we glory; neither of you nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome as Apostles of Christ« (1 Thessalonians 2. 4-6; *SV3* 14, 349; *WL* 367).

With this, we have reached the final point in Kierkegaard's argument. To bear witness to love is to bear witness to Christ, and to follow Him, is to be made like Him in being despised and rejected of men.

This Christological conclusion has been hinted at earlier in the text. We recall that the opening prayer insisted that love could never be spoken of rightly if Christ were forgotten. In the discourse »Love does not seek its own [advantage]« Kierkegaard reminded us that Christ was the pattern («*Forbillede*») of love drawing us to him that we might be conformed to his likeness. The human being is the image – figure («*Billede*») – of God, yet, consistently with what Kierkegaard says about the figurative and metaphorical nature of language, this image does not found its own meaning. The image requires fulfillment, and this fulfillment is its transformation into the likeness of the divine pattern, the »*For-billede*,« the anti-type that impresses the image with its true meaning.

The argument at this point is Christological, and yet the logic that demands such a Christological fulfillment is a logic inscribed in the very structures of language itself. The self-sacrificial, apostolic »transcendent« witness to Christ is a figure projected by the question that first arises on the ground of a purely human concern: What is it to speak aright of love? But this question, as we have seen, is already implied in the prior question of what it is to speak meaningfully at all. Importantly, both the question and the characterisation of the one who bears witness to its answer are conceivable within the Socratic, i.e. the *humanum*. And the answer that Kierkegaard has given is also conceivable within the *humanum*: that to speak meaningfully is to speak from the self-conscious standpoint of our spiritual centre, knowing what we mean to say and really intending it, and, with that, to will spiritual community with those with whom one speaks; and, since this community is not, and cannot be, immediately revealed in the phenomenal surface of language or society, this means willing the unseen, future, eschatological fulfilment of meaning, when God's view of the world will shine forth in unconcealed radiance. To say »I love you,« then, is both to state the presupposition that first makes meaningful discourse possible, the presupposition of mutual good will with no hidden reservation or deception – a statement that is substantial-

ly identical with the Christian affirmation »I hope for you that you will be found in Christ, on the Last Day.«

But, in case this invocation of eschatological illumination might seem too premature, »The work of love in praising love« ends by once again reminding us of the opacity and ambiguity of all words of love, and that it is always possible when a human being speaks of love that what is said is said in the spirit of »vanity, pride, in short, of evil, but it is also possible that it is love« (SV3 14, 356; WL 374).

We come to the »Conclusion« («*Slutning*»), which is not written in the form of a discourse. Here we encounter two themes that underline what I have been arguing. The first (which has appeared in a variety of contexts in the course of the book) is what Kierkegaard calls »the Christian like-for-like, eternity's like-for-like.« This, says Kierkegaard, is different from the Old Testamental like-for-like of »an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.« Instead, it redefines the relationships amongst human beings in terms of their individual God-relationship, such that how I am in my dealings with others is determinative for the nature of my God-relationship. Whether I really love others, whether my heart, my will, is in how I am with them, decides whether I am really concerned with God from and in my heart. But the Christian »like-for-like« extends beyond this. Challengingly, the judgment we pass on others rebounds on ourselves, because – whether we realise it or not – the judgment we make on others reveals the true thoughts of our own hearts and how we wish God to be and to act. Indeed, such judgements anticipate the eschatological revelation of true intentions, but by so doing they bring us ourselves into judgment.

The second point is that all of this is not a matter of externalities but of conscience. Conscience, however – and here Kierkegaard calls upon a theme we encounter in several other works – is not a matter of my subjective self-awareness, it is not what I know of myself, by myself. It is not my own conviction that I am speaking or acting in good faith or with a good will. »In conscience,« says Kierkegaard, »it is God who beholds a person, in order that the person may behold God in all things« (SV3 14, 359; WL 377). Conscience, that is to say, is a circle that cannot be closed. It is not my view on things, or my will, but an external view on me, it is the knowledge that in doing what I am doing, in saying what I am saying, I am »before God.«

To speak of an external view here, however, does not mean re-invoking the objectivity of dogma, since it is precisely the possibility of

this external view that underwrites the necessary ambiguity of all talk of love. I may question my own heart, I should question my own heart, in all I think or say or do, but I cannot answer for it. No matter how sure I am of my good faith, I am not the one who finally decides whether I am in good faith. The hidden source of love – to return to the first discourse – is not in me, but beyond me. Therefore the meaning of love, whether I really mean love in any of my deeds or words, is not something I can ever finally assure myself of. God alone knows.

Yet such a confession of agnosticism is not, cannot, be a matter of complacency. This is not agnosticism concerning some contingent fact or other. This is ignorance concerning who I am, concerning the Spirit that is in me, such that in every moment I am deciding my eternal destiny, my being-before-God, by the truth of what I say or do *although this truth necessarily eludes me*. My eternal happiness, my very being, is the stake I place in every communicative act. But it is not as if I could avoid such a risk by staying at home, by a policy of non-engagement: for that too would be a decision, an active refusal that would also fall under the inexorable judgment of the Christian like-for-like.

This then is our situation: that the moment we speak, the moment we find ourselves engaged in a communicative process, we find ourselves caught up in the ambiguity, the potentially tragic ambiguity, of a metaphorical world. In this world, Spirit is ever in play, but never established. It is ever at risk in the opaque materiality of the realm of signs. The temporal dimension of this situation also points to the non-finality of any judgment, the non-fulfilment of any intention. But this same temporal dimension allows for the postulate of an eschatological resolution that holds open the door of hope. But whether to pass through that door is the greatest or the meanest step we can take is itself irresolvable from our perspective.

I began by remarking how Kierkegaard characteristically opposes the aesthetic and the religious, the poetic and the Christian. However, from the standpoint at which we have now arrived, it is possible to see that this dichotomy is not so clear cut. For if the realm of the poetic remains under the rubric of metaphor, imprecision, ambiguity, and, in its modern development, irony, there is no higher language to which we can appeal. No translation of poetic image into logic can solve the essential problem of the poetic word. For the issue is ultimately not one of the form of expression, but of language as such and the problem of intentionality being veiled in the phenomenal materiality of language: that

language inherently and of itself problematizes its own meaningfulness is the heart of the matter.

One consequence of all this is that the correlation of form and content, on which the critical standards of the aesthetic depend, is possible only in a very limited sphere, outside which the principle of aesthetic judgment cannot be maintained. But no less consistent with all that Kierkegaard has been saying is the comment that poetic form cannot of itself exclude the possibility of a heartfelt meaning that would be well-pleasing to God. So the possibility is left open that poetic words, words such as those of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, may also be works of love, and their irony is not so much »mastered« as turned on itself in the cause of healing broken hearts, soothing troubled spirits and opening new horizons of hope.

## Notes

1. If *Works of Love* still lags far behind such early pseudonymous texts as *Fear and Trembling* in terms of attention given to it in the secondary literature, there is a steadily growing body of contemporary scholarship dealing with it – above all with its implications for our understanding of Kierkegaard's ethics. Examples of this would include the discussion of *Works of Love* in Pia Søltøft, *Svimmelhedens Etik – om forholdet mellem den enkelte og den anden*, Copenhagen, Gad, 2000 and, most recently, M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001. See also the essays in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser, eds., *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1998, largely devoted to this text and including summaries of recent literature on it. See also Philip L. Quinn, »Kierkegaard's Ethics« in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Hugh S. Pypers, »Cities of the Dead: The Relation of Person and Polis in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*« and Martin Andic, »Is Love of the Neighbour the Love of an Individual« – both in George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, eds., *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998; Martin Andic, »Confidence as a Work of Love« in George Pattison, *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1992. However, as indicated, most recent studies focus on the ethical significance of *Works of Love*, rather than on the *language* of Christian understanding and witness, which is the specific subject of this article. An exception is Dario Gonzalez' »Poetics and the 'Being' of Love« in Cappelørn and Deuser, op. cit. The present article is, I believe, in essential agreement with much of Gonzalez' argument, the difference being primarily one of focus, since he concentrates on the question of ontology as opposed to my emphasis on the pragmatics of Christian thought and existence. Andic's articles also include important hints about language.
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* in *Samlede Værker (SV3)*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1962, (SV3 14, 9; WL 3). All further Danish references are given in the text and are to this edition. References to the English translation are to *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, abbreviated WL.
3. The prayer is classically and strikingly Trinitarian in form. The opening petition is addressed to the Father, while the second addresses the Son and the third the Spirit in parallel formulations: »How should we talk properly about love if you were forgotten, you who revealed what love is, you, our Saviour and Reconciler, who gave yourself to save all! (...) How should we talk properly about love, if you were forgotten, you Spirit of love (...)« (SV3 14, 10; WL 3).