

“Who” is the Discourse? A Study in Kierkegaard’s Religious Literature

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Taking to heart the warning appended to the preface of *From the Papers of One Still Living* (that by skipping the preface one might just find that one had skipped the entire book) I begin by quoting in full the preface to the Two Upbuilding Discourses published on 5th May 1843, a preface which, in a sense, not only prefaces these two particular discourses but also the whole of Kierkegaard’s subsequent upbuilding literature. Indeed, it was, in several of its key expressions, to provide a model for many of the later prefaces.

Notwithstanding [the fact that] this little book (which is called “discourses” not sermons, because its author does not have authority to preach; “upbuilding discourses” not discourses for upbuilding, because the speaker in no way claims to be a teacher) only wishes to be what it is, a superfluity, and desires only to remain hidden, as when it came into existence in secret, I have not taken leave of it without an almost fairy-tale-like¹ hope. Insofar as, by being published, it goes, in a figurative sense, on a journey, I let my eye follow it a little while. So I saw how it went its way on lonesome paths or went alone along the thoroughfares. After this and that little misunderstanding, when it was deceived by a passing similarity, it finally met with that individual whom I, with joy and thankfulness call *my* reader, that individual whom it seeks, to whom it, as it were, stretches out its arms, that individual, who is willing enough to receive it, whether it finds him in the moment of meeting glad and cheerful or “weary and preoccupied”. Insofar as, on the other hand, by being published it can more properly be said to continue in stillness, without leaving the spot, I let my eye dwell on it a little while. So it stood there like an insignificant little flower, hidden in the great wood, sought out neither for its splendour, nor its scent, nor for nourish-

ment. But there too I saw, or thought I saw, how the bird, which I call *my* reader, suddenly caught a glimpse of it, winged its way down, plucked it up, and took it to itself. And when I had seen that I saw no more.²

This passage is worth pondering for many reasons.

Some commentators (in the days when Kierkegaard interpretation revolved around the twin poles of "The Great Earthquake" and "The Broken Engagement") have been intrigued by the identification, made in a later journal entry, of "that individual" with Regine Olsen. However, although the time may be coming when the biographical dimension may once more come to play a significant role in Kierkegaard studies it has been so overdone in the past that an appropriate distance between the life and the literature needs to be established before such an approach can be given its rightful place. For this reason the relation of the discourse material to the Regine story is not pursued here.

Other commentators have preoccupied themselves with the distinction drawn between "discourses" and "sermons" and the whole set of issues surrounding the kind of content and the kind of authority which would be appropriate in each case. There are certainly some interesting reflections to be gleaned among such issues, though one might, after surveying the whole discourse output, begin to suspect that some of them at least (and therefore "the discourse" as category) are not so far removed from sermons as at first seems to be being suggested, nor, conversely, so far removed from the poetic and aesthetic parts of Kierkegaard's authorship as we might at first assume. This question concerning the boundaries demarcating the various types or genres of religious writing in Kierkegaard's wide-ranging productivity is a question we should not lose sight of in what follows.

Other commentators might want to focus particularly on the peculiar kind of role given to the reader in the preface, a role which later prefaces, much of the discourse material itself as well as Kierkegaard's explicit comments on "How to read religious Discourses" all show to be crucial – so much so that Kierkegaard can say, simply, "The meaning lies in the appropriation", ie, "The meaning of the text lies in its appropriation by the reader." (6/245) We shall certainly not lose sight of this question either, but it is not where I want to begin.

My immediate aim is rather to draw attention to the extraordinary way in which Kierkegaard, in this preface, hypostatizes his "little book", regarding it as, in effect, a self-contained, autonomous object in the world, figured as a traveller setting out on a journey or as an "insignificant little flower" and separated out from his authorial presence, a separation which, in the closing words of the preface ("... I saw no more.") is declared to be complete. This literary conceit is, I want to suggest, reflected at many points in the text(s) of the discourses themselves, in such a way that "The Discourse" (or "The Talk" or "The Address"³) is similarly hypostatized and even personified. Thus my question "Who is the Discourse?" By pursuing this question we can learn not a little about the style and structure of Kierkegaard's religious writing and about the connection between that religious writing and other parts of his authorship.

To begin I shall offer a simple descriptive character-sketch, drawing on references scattered throughout the religious works to form a composite picture which is relatively homogenous and self-consistent – *at least* in equal measure to what we find in such other Kierkegaardian *dramatis personae* as Johannes Climacus, Assessor Wilhelm, Constantin Constantius et al. The references to which I am limiting myself here are those in which the process of hypostatization and personification has been carried through to a high degree. There are many weaker references which would serve both to endorse the picture given here and to extend it.

"The Discourse", then (like the book itself: a lonesome traveller, a little flower), is not obtrusive, does not force itself on the reader (4/115, 259; 11/119), seeking neither praise (4/175, 259) nor popularity (4/209, 259). It is not quarrelsome (4/217; 6/273, 277, 301) and does not aim to surprise or shock or frighten the reader (4/269; 6/258, 262, 275, 294; 11/124; 13/191). Nonetheless, it can be alarming (4/294, 304; 13/172) although its fundamental purpose is to be helpful (4/335; 6/290). It is at home with stillness and quietness (6/253, 273), shunning busyness (11/65) and is, in a deep sense, calming (13/201). It is, as has already been noted, without authority and does not therefore put itself in the position of sitting in judgement on its readers or of making distinctions among them, as if it knew in advance who its good readers were (4/68; 6/245, 265, 277, 301; 11/119, 125, 148, 154, 160, 165; 12/75; 13/250). On the contrary, it seeks to address all equally, dealing with those respects in which all

persons are the same (4/225). Its tone is serious and may well contain a warning (12/190) but it does not forget, where appropriate, to wear a smile (13/18). It has an essential and interdependent relation to love (12/206ff., 355), wanting to make clear that God is love (11/261) and calling for mercy on the part of the reader (12/308, 312). At the same time it rejects vulgar notions of human sympathy (11/132ff., 261) and exposes double-mindedness (11/60, 63). It itself is not worldly-minded (4/217; 13/121-2) and, similarly, presupposes the reader's concern for the eternal (13/132), fighting, on the basis of this presupposition, for the triumph of the eternal in a person (13/18). In this fight it cannot, as worldly oratory might, promise prosperity or recognition (11/124, 261; 12/185f.) but, instead, never grows tired of talking about suffering (11/100). In relation to worldly talk its presence is like that of a disturbing stranger who, merely by asking "What are you talking about?" will expose a trivial conversation for what it is (13/121-2). (Though it should be said again that its intention in doing this is neither ironic nor malicious – if it has this effect it has it by means of the guilty consciences of those taking part in the conversation.) Although it may thus be at odds with the preconceptions that shape the majority discourse of the day it is not without hope (11/13) nor courage (6/245; 11/13; 13/102) in its struggle. Indeed, its very existence is a "piece of daring" (4/336), a daring which may be said to correspond to that involved in staking the meaning of life on the eternal. It is not didactic (6/287) and does not set out to communicate knowledge (6/270, 321) – though, equally, it does not confuse thought or concepts (11/261) (in this respect, we may say, unlike systematic philosophy as Kierkegaard saw it). It is not diffuse (12/98), being content to go on repeating its point, "the same thing", over and over again (13/141). It addresses itself to the reader as an individual, in his or her singularity, yet, recalling that it seeks that in which all are equally alike, it is not excessively concrete, since that would draw attention away from the main, the universal point, the one thing needful, as it were (4/216, 225; 11/132, 154). Of itself it is nothing, poor and empty, unless received believingly (4/32; 13/141 – also, see below).

I hope that out of the mass of words a figure is starting to take shape. But what kind of figure? what kind of character is this nameless "Discourse"?

It might, perhaps, remind some readers of a *persona* such as Assessor Wilhelm, who certainly shared a number of "The

Discourse's" concerns. He too championed the cause of the universal and the eternal and he too sought to soften his words of warning with a smile. Going beyond the narrow characteristics we have examined thus far we might well come up with a not inconsiderable list of themes and interests shared by The Discourse and The Assessor. Both, for instance, make good use of poetic and imaginative language in the service of religion; both (largely) restrict their religious horizons to what Kierkegaard's more philosophically-minded pseudonyms might have called "immanence"; both are concerned to bring about repentance, conceived of by both as that act in and by which we acknowledge our nothingness before God and thereby re-establish ourselves in a properly creaturely relation to Him whilst at the same time being affirmed in those relationships and determinations (such as marriage, friendship, psychological growth and cultural activities) which belong to our human condition; both share such specific interests as temporality and the spiritual significance of youth (or, more precisely, the transition from youth to full, religiously resolute maturity). Yet there are also differences: The Assessor may well seek the universal, but, as we meet him in *Either/Or*, he has a specific message for a specific individual and is only too happy to talk about his own very specific circumstances in life (his wife, people he knows, things he has seen, books he has read). We get to know him in the surrounds of his bourgeois study with all the details that go to make up the concreteness of his individual existence. By way of contrast the self-effacement of The Discourse is carried through to a quite radical degree – so much so that one could almost read the discourses without realizing there was anybody there at all! Also, The Assessor makes it clear that in writing to the young man of *Either/Or* he has a very definite aim in mind. He is not just saying to him, "This is how you might, if you so choose, live your life" but "This is how you *should* live your life." This air of moral didacticism (which has so irritated several generations of readers) is effectively absent from the discourses. For The Discourse makes itself dependent on the reader in a manner and to an extent which is unparalleled in the case of The Assessor. The Assessor *knows* he is in the right – even if the reader does nothing about it. Whereas the mood of his epistles oscillates between indicative and imperative, that of the discourses is (to borrow a distinction which was of no little interest to Kierkegaard) subjunctive.

If, then, *The Discourse* is not to be found at home in The Assessor's comfortable town house (nor even in his rural villa), where does it belong? To prepare our answer to this question let us turn to an extract from the preface to the *Three Upbuilding Discourses* of October 1843, a passage to which we shall have reason to recur again later. Kierkegaard writes here of his hope that the book may find its true reader, who is said to be

that well-intentioned person, who reads aloud to himself what I write in silence, who, with his voice (Stemme) undoes the enchantment of the written characters, [who,] by speaking aloud calls forth what the dumb letters may well have on the tip of their tongue but are unable to utter without great difficulty, stammeringly and brokenly, [who,] by his [sympathetic] mood (Stemming) sets free the imprisoned thoughts, which long for liberty ...

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In reflecting on this passage let us also hold in mind the imagery of the preface to the first set of discourses (in which the book was figured as a traveller setting out on a lonesome journey being bid farewell by its author and as a solitary flower hidden in the depths of a great forest) and let us also recall, most pointedly, the author's "fairy-tale-like" hope for his book. Now let us ask: do not both the imagery of the first preface and the description in the October 1843 preface of what is accomplished by the act of reading aloud evoke the atmosphere of a world with which Kierkegaard was familiar as a poetic reader, as a student of medieval culture and as a writer – the world of the fairy-story? And, like so much else in the world of faery, do not the images of the hero venturing forth on his quest, of the solitary flower which awaits discovery, of the voice which undoes an ancient enchantment all unite in evoking that transition from ignorance to consciousness, from cryptogamous to phanerogamous life (3/96; 5/136), from childhood and adolescence to adult self-understanding and self-commitment, which is of such continuous concern throughout the discourse literature? Bearing these correspondences in mind we can begin to see how this at first uncanny placing of *The Discourse* in the world (the romantic, archaic, even, perhaps, regressive world) of the fairy story might open up important insights into Kierkegaard's religious authorship. It can, for example, provide the context which

explains a puzzling feature of *The Discourse* as described above. For it was stated that *The Discourse* set out to be of assistance to the reader in a mood of seriousness and with a concern for the reader's relation to the divine and eternal. Nonetheless, despite the importance and even urgency of its task *The Discourse* shows a curious reticence with regard to the potential recipients of its message – being very different in this respect from, say, an apostle, an evangelist or even a bourgeois moralist. It does not obtrude or force itself on the reader and can go so far as to declare itself to be totally dependent on him or her. This strange mixture of urgency and reticence, of serious purpose and inconclusiveness corresponds, I suggest, very closely to the typical attitude of the fairy-tale hero or heroine who seeks or awaits an undisclosed destiny which, though it be the subject's ownmost truth or destiny, must nonetheless depend on the agency of some external event or person.

The language of the October 1843 preface confirms this correlation between the world of *The Discourse* and the world of faery from another perspective. In quoting that preface attention was brought to the use of the cognate terms *voice* (*Stemme*) and *mood* (*Stemming*) to describe that power by which the spell of the written word was to be broken, and we may remind ourselves that these terms evoke a romantic doctrine of language in which speech is understood as immediate expression of both meaning and subjectivity and in which the very essence of speech is located in poetry, in lyrical musicality, in which the voicing of the soul's inwardness as mood overflows the constraints of reason and logic. So, in the context of the preface, we, as readers, are being summoned to become that voice whose romanticism of reading supplants the prose of the text; it is our voice (*Stemme*), our mood or feeling or attunement (*Stemming*) which is to release the inner subjective life of the text which we find (most wonderful of all!) to be also our own subjective life. It is our self which is set free by the reading of the text. Now this romantic model of self-discovery is closely correlated in romantic art and romantic theory with the realm of faery as representative of a stage both of the development of culture and of the life of the soul. Moreover – decisively – the early journals provide ample evidence that such a correlation was not merely known to Kierkegaard but was of singular interest to him.⁴

There are, of course, also differences between the aesthetic ambience of the fairy-story and the religious world of the up-

building literature, differences in which, as we are about to see, the personification of The Discourse plays an important part. One such difference, for example, concerns the way in which dependence on external contingencies, on "fortune", is generally understood by Kierkegaard to be a distinctive characteristic of aesthetic immediacy, a characteristic, moreover, which the religious person must be resolved to shed. Insofar as (as I have just now suggested) The Discourse also seems to share this characteristic it would seem to disqualify itself from any claim to religious seriousness. Note, however, that the fairy-story presents the quest for selfhood as a finished process, as a story which contains its own end and thereby becomes an appropriate object of aesthetic contemplation. In the case of the religious work, on the other hand, The Discourse as personified figure disrupts the striving for completeness on the part of the discourse as literary form. For the ending of the story requires the action of the reader in such a way that it is the reader herself who becomes the external force, the "fortune", which brings about the denouement, works the magic – or, better, undoes the magic – and accomplishes the task of self-attainment. It is through the reader that The Discourse finishes its story – precisely in and by means of the movement in which it becomes the reader's own story. The Discourse as personified figure serves to remind us that *this* adventure can never be finished within the limits of aesthetic form.

We are, inexorably, approaching the crucial question concerning the role of the reader, but before broaching that question directly there is one further objection to the proposed rapprochement between faery and religion which must be considered. This objection simply rests on the utter difference in tone between the two types of writing. The one is imbued with all the colours of imagination and fantasy, whilst the other goes its way with the solid step of sober prose. The one leads us away into a world (or worlds) beyond time and place, a fictitious, non-existent world, whilst the other penetrates the most concrete issues of existential reality. But consider for a moment the following extract from the journals: "The old Christian dogmatic terminology is like an enchanted castle where the most beautiful princes and princesses rest in a deep sleep – it needs only to be awakened, brought to life, in order to stand in its full glory."⁵ Religion is, in a sense, prosaic; and yet the Christ-

ian religion, in Christendom, has suffered a fate as curious as that of any fairy-tale princess. A religion which began by demanding unconditional obedience and offering unconditional joy, a religion which was built up by the sufferings of its martyrs (who, by their martyrdom proved themselves to be authentic disciples of their master) – this same religion has become a matter of approximation and accommodation to bourgeois values, the religion of comfortable, self-satisfied citizens, geese, who are nonetheless capable of trampling to death any who dare to remind them of what it is to fly. Or (but essentially consistent with all this) Christian teaching has become a matter of philosophical speculation, an exercise in logic, an intellectual conjuring trick bringing about the purely fantastic mediation of Being and Thought.⁶ To undo the enchantment the story must be told backwards,⁷ the teacher must begin where the learner is, entering into the illusion of the learner in order to undo it. Thus if the sobriety of bourgeois Christendom is in fact a monstrous illusion, a case of the higher lunacy, a fantasy, there may well be a fittingness (especially for one schooled in the Lutheran *communicatio idiomatum*) in the Christian communicator purloining the very language which “sober” Christendom regards as the language of fantasy in order to restore to its full glory the prose of true Christianity.

Leaving these considerations in a state of suggestive openness, let us move forward by examining more formally the way in which the personification of The Discourse functions in the context of the eternal triangle of author, text and reader.

In doing so we should note, firstly, that by the very process of hypostatization and personification The Discourse shows itself to be a substitute for something or someone. For whom? For Kierkegaard, perhaps, “the author”? But it is not so simple. For the religious works are pervaded by the conceit that the reader is a “listener” listening to the words of a “speaker”, a conceit which the advice that the reader should read aloud aims to strengthen. It is thus the “speaker” who has first claim to be prime substitute for the “actual” author, Søren Kierkegaard, whose only wish, according to the preface to the *Two Upbuilding Discourses* of 1844, “is to be as one who has gone away” (4/161) and who knows neither the destination (4/259) nor the effect (6/248) of his books, since they are like envoys sent out into the world who never bring back to their sender any reply from those to whom they have been sent (4/263). The Discourse

thus arrives on a scene already characterized by figuration and substitution. In this context it comes to play the part of "speaker" just as the "speaker" takes the part of the "author". It is thus a figure and a substitute for a figure and a substitute. We are already (and alarmingly quickly) near the "Chinese puzzle" artifice (2/14) of some of the (supposedly very different) pseudonymous works, with their books-within-books and their convoluted interactions between authors, editors and characters.

Is the gap between "direct" and "indirect" communication already narrowing? And what, in this context, is the burden of the following remark taken from the unpublished *Lectures on Communication*?

One of the tragedies of modern times is precisely this – to have abolished the "I", the personal "I". For this very reason real ethical-religious communication is as if vanished from the world. For ethical-religious truth is related essentially to personality and can only be communicated by an *I* to an *I*. As soon as the communication becomes objective in this realm, the truth has become untruth. Personality is what we need. Therefore I regard it as my service that by bringing poetized personalities who say *I* (my pseudonyms) into the center of life's actuality I have contributed, if possible, to familiarizing the contemporary age again to hearing an *I*, a personal *I* speak (not that fantastic pure *I* and its ventriloquism).

JP 656/VIII²B 88 n.d., 1847

This is a somewhat peculiar remark for a number of reasons. To start with, it ascribes a role to the pseudonyms which is seemingly at odds both with their extremely complex relation to their author (Søren Kierkegaard) and with their negative function in the scheme of religious communication as that is set out, for instance, in *The Point of View*. In that context, notice, Kierkegaard assumed responsibility for the pseudonyms precisely by *disowning* them, by declaring them to be the works of his left hand, a deception, a mere (and, in any case, an inverted) propaedeutic to the serious business of becoming a Christian and thus determined in their character by the need to accommodate the communication to the illusions of the age. How, then, can Kierkegaard say here that it is by means of these pseudonyms that he has managed to reintroduce a "personal *I*" or

“life’s actuality” into ethical-religious communication? Especially when he himself concedes that his own presence, *his* “personal *I*”, is veiled in these works – “I never venture to use quite directly my own *I*”, as he puts it a few lines later. But then he is not claiming to be the “personal *I*” concerned. It is, on the contrary, said to be the pseudonyms themselves, the “poetized personalities”, who achieve this renewed foregrounding of personality and I-saying at “the center of life’s actuality”. To repeat: this is a somewhat peculiar remark. For it seems as if we are to understand the existentializing of ethical-religious communication as occurring precisely in and by means of fictional, illusory “personalities” – few of whom are religiously serious and none of whom are decisively Christian. This situation would scarcely measure up well to the kind of standard laid down by a later pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, when he declared the personality of the *actual* communicator to be of decisive significance. With specific reference to preaching he wrote, “So daring is this thing of being the I who preaches, the speaker, an I who, by preaching and in that he preaches, commits himself unconditionally, displays his life, so that, if possible, one might see right into his soul: to be this I, that is daring!” (16/219) So daring, indeed, that the history of Christian preaching shows a continual decline in the number of those daring to do it. Instead of preachers who speak in the first person singular, who look their flock in the eye and address them as “Du”, we have priests who offer “reflections” or “observations”, withdrawing their eyes from contact with the eyes of the congregation and looking in on themselves. The end product of this process is the contemporary person who “resembles not so much a human being as one of those figures carved from stone who have no eyes.” (ibid.) Such a one makes of himself and his observations a work of art, an aesthetic object which calls more for admiration than discipleship. The end of Christianity. Christendom. – But I suggest that we would be over-hasty if we were to start beating the pseudonyms with this particular stick and that their aesthetic quality is rather different from the aesthetic quality of the priest and his observations. Nor is this difference merely to do with the fact that the priest is a degenerate case, a falling-away from an original standard of perfection, whilst the pseudonym stands at the beginning of a chain of communication which leads back towards the religious and, ultimately, Christian standpoint. It has rather to do with the way in which the “I” functions in the

text. Thus, Hegel and Heiberg may allow their "actual" names to appear on the title-pages of their books, but when they write it is as "we" or "one" (or even as if they themselves were identical with the standpoint of "Spirit" or "history"). This is not so in the case of the pseudonyms. Clearly no one in Copenhagen in 1843 seriously believed that one of their fellow citizens bore the name "Victor Eremita". The pseudonym was recognizable from Day 1 as a pseudonym, even if the actual author was unknown. But it is correct, as the *Lectures on Communication* argue, that within their books the pseudonymous authors allow their own particularity as (albeit fictional) authors to enter into the discussion (even if, typically, it is only to say: how can the views and opinions of such a one as I be worthy of consideration by serious people, by proper citizens?). In this respect they are also to be distinguished from fictional characters *within* books (although sometimes, of course, they turn up as just such "characters" in other pseudonyms works). The pseudonyms do not establish the full actuality of personal communication. What they do establish is personal communication as a possibility. To contrast them again with the kind of ethical-religious communication offered (in Kierkegaard's view) by the likes of Hegel and Heiberg: the philosophers, who are actual individuals in "real life", treat the issues as abstract and impersonal, as possibilities, and, as such, only of concern to the reader in the realm of possibility. The pseudonyms, on the other hand, who are only themselves "possibilities", fictions, in "real life", offer their books as the views of individuals, thereby creating the possibility for the reader to respond to them in her individuality or actuality, if she so chooses. *If she chooses*, if, that is she shares the understanding of interpretation implied in the same "Victor Eremita", namely, that the reader must labour in solitude to wrest the meaning from the text and thus achieve and take responsibility for the victory gained. *The acknowledged fiction of the pseudonym is precisely what creates the space in which the reader's response becomes decisive.* (Before returning from this digression it might also be mentioned that in a number of the pseudonymous works – *Either/Or*, *Repetition* and *Stages on Life's Way* for example – the "primary" pseudonym – a title we might bestow on such individuals as "A", The Assessor, The young Man, The Quidam, etc. – is not necessarily identical with the book's editor or publisher. This distinction provides a further devolution of responsibility for interpreting the text onto the

reader, since the distance between authoritative author and reader is rendered virtually impassable, and the reader is left firmly in and to her own actuality.)

There is much in this that might be repeated in the context of the upbuilding works. For here too (as we have been discovering) the author is separated from the reader by several mutually interacting intermediaries such as The Discourse or the Speaker, once these are grasped as quasi-autonomous hypostatizations. In other words, the double substitution of Speaker and Discourse performs an analogous function to that of the editor/writer duality in the pseudonymous works in facilitating the decisive existential appropriation of the text by the reader.

We come, then, to the role of the reader – and there is no doubt that, in relation to the upbuilding literature, that role is immense. Let us read again the preface to the *Three Upbuilding Discourses* of October 1843, where the reader is described as

that well-intentioned person, who reads aloud to himself what I write in silence, who, with his voice (Stemme) undoes the enchantment of the written characters, by speaking aloud calls forth what the dumb letters may well have on the tip of their tongue but are unable to utter without great difficulty, stammeringly and brokenly, [who,] by this [sympathetic] mood (Stemming) sets free the imprisoned thoughts, which long for liberty ...

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Now, there is that in this passage which might make us hesitate before approving the claim that Kierkegaard's model of good communication is suitably *personal*. For isn't this just the kind of privileging of speech over writing which has been the object of Derrida, complex and subtle critique of metaphysical logocentrism? And, if that is the case, then isn't it also the case that Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegel (as a, if not *the*, prime example of logocentrism) turns out to be merely a relative opposition, an opposition within a shared paradigm in which immediate self-saying counts as the unsurpassable form of truthful discourse? The only difference, on this reading, would be that in the one case it is the philosophical author and in the other the religious reader who is credited with being the supreme individual instance of such self-saying. That this, worryingly, could be an implication of this text might be given further credibility by a

number of other texts. Take, for example, the preface to the *Four Upbuilding Discourses* of 1844, where it is said that when "my" reader has received the text "it ceases to be: it is nothing for itself and by itself, but all that it is, it is only for him and by him" (4/263). Or, from the discourse "On the Occasion of a Confession" (in *Discourses on Imagined Occasions*): "Yea, even when there is a speech, you the reader are the one who speaks with yourself by means of the speaker's voice. What the speaker shall say precisely to you, only you know, how you understand the discourse (Talen), he does not know, only you know" (6/248). Or, from the same discourse (a quotation already cited): "The meaning lies in the appropriation" (6/245). An extreme reader response theory of the kind which these excerpts could easily be taken as offering might well ring the changes on the Hegelian model of monistic logocentrism but would, at the end of the day, be no less monistic and no less logocentric. In place of the solitary contemplation of the philosopher we would be left with the solitary contemplation of the devout soul. And what significance would the discourse itself have? Wouldn't it shrink to being a mere occasion – or even disappear altogether? For, on this account, why bother at all? Isn't Kierkegaard embarking on a line of thought which has led to the more vacuous extremities of artistic minimalism, extremities at which the only thing that matters is the "idea" of the artist or the recipient of the art-work, whilst the medium of communication is reduced to a pure accident, a matter of no concern?

Kierkegaard, interestingly, seems to have been aware of such a possibility – and rejects it, although his rejection does not take the form of a neat philosophical argument. Thus, he acknowledges that if it is indeed the case that no human being can "give" the eternal resolution on behalf of which The Discourse fights to any other human being, then some critic might want to suggest that "one could therefore just as well keep quiet, if there is no probability of winning others." Such a critic, he replies

has thereby shown that whilst his life may well thrive in and be nourished by probability and each of his undertakings in the service of probability may meet with success, he has never dared ... to think that probability is a deception; but to be daring for the sake of truth is what gives human life and human relationships pith and meaning, to

dare [to plunge to] the source of spiritedness, whereas probability is the sworn enemy of spiritedness, an illusion by means of which the sensual person puts off the time and keeps eternity at bay ...

(4/335)

There is nothing logical about this response. It is not an argument. It is simply an appeal, an appeal to consider the kind of commitment involved in the risk of staking the meaning of life on the existence of the eternal and the kind of discourse which becomes fitting when such a stake has been placed, namely, discourse in which the requirement of personality, of personal responsibility and self-commitment must make itself heard. But, as we have seen, the author is no more directly present in the text of the religious discourses than in the case of the pseudonymous works (or, to put it another way, there are comparable structures of absence). What, then, is there to stop the meaning from sliding into the one-dimensionality of extreme reader-response claims? What sustains the enormous tension involved in the labour of authentically personal, dialogical communication?

I do not claim that it is the hypostatization and personification of The Discourse alone which accomplishes this task, nor do I claim that we can say beyond all doubt that it is in fact accomplished in Kierkegaard's writing – but I do claim that *if* the task is accomplished then this double act of figuration and substitution has something to do with it. Just as in the pseudonymous works it is the pseudonymous “I”, whose only validation is provided by the text itself, which, as substitute for the absent author, enables the reader to make an actual and personal response, so too, in the various religious discourses, when once the author (whose name appears, briefly, on the title-page) has absented himself as quickly as possible, the double substitution of Speaker and Discourse prepares the way for the reader's existential appropriation of, for example, an eternal resolve.

In thus yielding to the actuality of the reader, however, The Discourse is not as literally nothing as its assiduous self-effacement might suggest, for it does have a distinctive *persona* of a hidden/revealed, active/passive kind. I have argued that the world of faery provides one important literary source for this *persona* and that the way in which it is reworked by Kierkegaard

contributes to the reader's being enabled to make of this web of fiction and substitution a matter of "ultimate concern".

There are, of course, other worlds and other models in play in the figuring of *The Discourse*. There is, for example, the maieutic. But (apart from the fact that this category has received its fair share of attention in Kierkegaard scholarship) the very fact that it might now seem so easy to talk of the maieutic in relation to the religious literature points to a crumbling of the barriers between indirect (pseudonymous) and direct (religious, "signed") communication which Kierkegaard was so often at such pains to establish. This paper might, therefore, contribute to supporting the suggestion that his best works and most fruitful insights transcend this duality in such a way that even the direct is indirect, that is, that even the "direct communication" of the religious writing turns out to be somewhat "indirect" after all. Certainly we must conclude that it is rhetorically much more complex than it might at first seem.

Nor have I made much here of what is possibly Kierkegaard's best-known discussion of the role of the reader, in the discourse known in English as *Purity of Heart* (11/113ff.).⁸ This discussion turns on the image of the theatre, with the speaker figured as the prompter and the reader as actor, speaking aloud the lines fed him by the prompter before the ultimate audience: the God Himself. There is certainly much in this discussion to engage our attention, but in the present context there is one aspect in particular which might be highlighted: that the model of the dramatic or self-dramatizing self which *Purity of Heart* invokes, like the model of the dialogical reader which I have sought to develop here, could be taken as a decisive rupture with the monistic conception of the self. For the very possibility of such self-dramatization bespeaks an understanding of the self as always in a situation of revealing itself to itself as its own other – an understanding which illuminates from another angle the figuring of *The Discourse* as an enchanted self engaging with the reader, engaging the reader, in an adventure of self-discovery. More than a "resonating one" (Don Cupitt), the self is always already constituted as self-and-other. In this structure lies both the possibility of its being-for-others and of its being-for-God; or, and this is a rephrasing the validity of which cannot be settled here, this structure is the primordial reflection of the self's situation *prior* to its constitution as self as a being-for-others and a being-for-God (in other words, that the structure of

relationality both precedes and determines the sphere within which alone selfhood can be spoken of). The structuring of the self as always already in relation is, I am arguing, determinative not merely for the content of Kierkegaard's religious discourses (their WHAT) but also, perhaps more importantly, their form (their HOW). Since this structure hinges on the holding-together of both presence and absence it creates the possibility for Kierkegaard's religious discourses to be read as an exemplary instance of the self-representation of the religious quest in an age in which the presence of God can no longer be taken for granted as one of life's great "givens".

Notes

- 1 The translation "fairy-tale-like" for "eventyrlig" is not entirely happy, since the associations of "fairy-tale" in English belong chiefly in the nursery and there is a serious (even, on occasion, grim) aspect of faery in Kierkegaard's usage. For a full discussion of Kierkegaard's relation to fairy-tales see Grethe Kjær, *Eventyrets Verden i Kierkegaards Forfatterskab* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1991).
- 2 S. Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 3rd edition, 1962) Vol. 4, p. 13. Further references are given in the text in the form 4/13.
- 3 For the purposes of this paper the differences between such terms as "Talen" and "Foredrag" are not regarded as significant.
- 4 See, for example G. Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Theory and Critique of Art: Its Theological Significance* (Univ. of Durham: Ph. D. thesis, 1983), Chapter 6 D "The Dialectics of Romanticism". Also, such journal entries as I A 250. Grundtvig's understanding of language may also be relevant here.
- 5 Cited from Hong and Hong (tr. and ed.) *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1967-78) IV 4774 (II A 110, 1837). Further references are given in the text with the Hong and Hong serial number, preceded by JP and followed by the Danish number and date.
- 6 Cf. Kjær, *op.cit.*, pp. 121ff.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 97ff.
- 8 See G. Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 170ff.