Peripheries of Space, Self and Literary Style in R. S. Thomas's Readings of Søren Kierkegaard

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Abstract

One question that has dominated discussion of Søren Kierkegaard's writings is how to take account of their literary form when determining their meaning and purpose. This article contends that by paying greater attention to the reception of Kierkegaard's writings in works of creative literature we can learn a significant amount about the interaction of aesthetic form and theological content within them. To demonstrate this, it conducts a close reading of seven poems about Kierkegaard by the twentieth-century Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000).

Each of Thomas's poems situates the experience of writing and reading Kierkegaard's works on a sequence of spatial, psychological and literary peripheries. By doing this, they illustrate how those works decentre and destabilise the single individual reader aesthetically in a manner that correlates with the necessary decentring and destabilising of the individual self before God. They illustrate, too, a correspondence between the sensation of aesthetic collapse that accompanies the ultimate incommensurability of form and content in Kierkegaard's writings and the sensation of spiritual collapse that accompanies a recognition of the incommensurable paradox at the heart of Christian faith.

Keywords

Søren Kierkegaard, R. S. Thomas, peripheries, aesthetic form, theological content

Søren Kierkegaard was well aware of his reputation as an eccentric figure on the streets of Copenhagen. 'I'm looked upon as a kind of Englishman', he complained to his journal in 1848, 'a half-crazy eccentric with whom let's all of us, notables and street urchins alike, imagine we can make sport' (*PJ* 331; *SKP* IX A 298).[1] On some occasions, the target of this communal merriment was the supposedly unequal length of Kierkegaard's much-publicised trousers (e.g. *PJ* 260 and 323; *SKP* VIII I A 99 and IX A 209); on this one, it was his writings. Kierkegaard nonetheless identified a common cause behind the laughter in both cases: a failure on the part of his detractors to see anything other than a risible mismatch between the seemingly informal and amusing manner in which he and his writings were dressed on the one hand and the unquestionable intellect that resided within on the other. 'I am supposed to be a genius', he continued in that same journal entry, 'but such an introverted genius that I can neither see nor hear'. In Kierkegaard's view, it was not he who had failed to make visible or audible his innermost ideas in an appropriate form, but his critics who had remained deaf and blind to the carefully crafted exposition of those ideas in his writings. Unable to recognise in his output either that 'inner pathos I'd have thought could stir stones' or the overarching scale and quality of his achievement, 'which in some areas none of my contemporaries can match, let alone the whole', his contemporaries regarded his authorship instead as little more than a superficial pastime, 'like fishing and so on', and thus as fair game for their raillery. For Kierkegaard, though, their mockery recalled the abuses heaped on Christ by the priests and elders. 'Well, so be it!' he consoled himself towards the end of this entry. 'When I was a child I was taught that they spat upon Christ. Now I am a poor and lowly person and a sinner, so will no doubt get off more lightly'.

One of the scourgings Kierkegaard may have had in mind when he penned this passage was the essay 'Et Besøg i Sorø' (A Visit in Sorø) by P. L. Møller. Published a couple of years earlier, this essay recounts a jovial evening spent in the company of the local literati. Møller relates how he brought the conversation round to Kierkegaard with the assertion 'There is a fellow who beats all our Danish and most of the German philosophers, don't you think so?' (*KW* XIII: 98). No

sooner has this compliment been issued, however, than it is qualified. 'He certainly has not had a warmer admirer than I', Møller continues, 'but at the same time I am all the more annoyed at the barren and pernicious use he sometimes makes of his remarkable gifts' (*ibid.*). Singling out *Stages on Life's Way* as a particularly lamentable example of what he means, Møller and other members of the group proceed to bemoan what they perceive to be an incompatibility of style and content in Kierkegaard's writings. 'What I have against all these books', one of them asserts, 'is that every time one feels able to surrender to pure literary enjoyment the author gets in the way with his own personal ethical and religious development' (*ibid.*). Another agrees that parts of *Stages* 'are written with unusual subtlety and delicateness and display an extraordinarily mature talent' (*KW* 102-3) but complains too about the lack of fit between aesthetic form and ethical content. 'Den abstracte Æsthetik', he opines

> der aldeles ikke maa støtte sig til Ethiken og saaledes svæver i Luften som en Sky, er egentlig ikke Andet end en med poetiske Blomster smykket Epikuræisme, ligesom dens Modsætning, den fra Poesien bortvendte Ethik, den ægteskabelige Lykke, paa denne Vei grændser nær til Philisteri; – disse to Modsætninger, som Forfatteren med saa stor Ængstelighed troer at burde holde ud fra hinanden, maa jeg rigtignok erklære for at være Udsvævelser paa begge Sider. (Møller 1846: 178-9)
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> (The abstract esthetics, which absolutely must not take its stand on ethics and thus hovers in the air like a cloud, is nothing, actually, but Epicureanism decked out with poetic flowers, just as its opposite, the ethical, married happiness, divorced from the poetic, borders on philistinism – these two contrasts, which the author most anxiously believes ought to be kept apart, I must certainly declare to be excesses on both sides [*KW* 103].)

Møller concurs with this view that Kierkegaard's literary style can become so amorphous and showy at times that it is simply incapable of conveying anything of substance. Complaining that Kierkegaard's

earlier accomplishments as a writer have in the worst parts of *Stages* 'endelig … bleven til bare Færdighed og Methoden til en staaende Maneer, saa at Enhver kan aflure ham Kunsten' (finally become nothing more than facility, and method has become static technique that anyone can spot), he contends that Kierkegaard's literary style is accordingly not really a style at all, but rather a clownish activity incapable of expressing anything other than empty, formless, self-indulgent nonsense. Kierkegaard 'bekymrer sig ikke om Læseren' (does not care about the reader), Møller declares

> thi han skriver for sin Magelighed, ikke om et klassisk Forfatternavn, thi han skriver formløst; han bevæger sig i Sproget som en engelsk Clown, han gaaer paa hænderne og slaaer Saltomortaler i det, men han har ingen Stil; thi han bruger overflødige Ord og siger Alt, hvad der falder ham ind. (Møller 1846: 176)
>
> (for he writes for his own comfort; he is not concerned with being known as a classic author, for he writes without form. He moves about in the language as an English clown, walking on his hands and turning somersaults in it, but he has no style, for he uses superfluous words and says everything that comes to his head. [*KW* 100-1]).

This lack of form and style, Møller continues, serves to dissolve everything it encompasses of any real content, including Kierkegaard's (nowadays much celebrated) treatment of personal identity. In *Stages*, for instance, 'Man træffer her et mandligt Individ, det har tabt Alt, hvad der constituerer Personligheden' (one meets a masculine individual who has lost everything that constitutes personality):

> Følelse, Forstand, Villie, Beslutning, Handling, Marv, Nerve- og Muskelkraft – Alt er gaaet op i Dialektik, i en steril Dialektik, der hvirvler sig om et uvist Centrum, uvist om der skeer ifølge Centrifugal- eller Centripetalkraften, indtil den tilsidst langsomt fordunster. (Møller 1846: 176)

> (Feeling, understanding, will, resolution, action, backbone, nerve, and muscle power – all are dissolved in dialectic, in a barren dialectic that swirls around an indefinite center, uncertain as to whether it proceeds as a result of centrifugal or centripetal force, until it eventually, slowly vanishes. [*KW* 101])

Kierkegaard was well aware of public excoriations of his literary style such as Møller's and sensitive to their charge that its outer pyrotechnics served only to sustain a ludic vacancy rather than any serious ethical or religious content. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he despaired at times of ever finding a reader among his contemporaries capable of following the movement he hoped his writings would inspire '*fra* "Digteren" – fra det Æsthetiske … *til* Antydningen af den meest inderlige Bestemmelse i det Christelige' (*SKSV* XIII: 494) ('*from* "the poet", from the aesthetic … *to* the indication of the most inward qualification of the essentially Christian' (*KW* XXII: 5). Kierkegaard nonetheless asserted that he and his writings would be much better understood and appreciated in the future – and for the very same reasons they were currently pilloried. 'Just Det, som Samtiden forekastede mig, og hvorover den vrededes paa mig', he wrote in a draft for an account of his authorship, 'just det, ordret det Samme vil blive Lovtalen over mig i Eftertiden: han er sær og stædig og stolt, han vil ikke slaae af, ikke give efter' (*SKP* IX B 64) (The very thing for which my contemporaries rejected me and were angry with me, precisely that, literally the same, will become my eulogy in the future: he is eccentric, refractory, and proud; he will not reduce the price, will not yield [*KW* XXII: 278]).

In this, Kierkegaard has largely been proven right. He is nowadays much more likely to be lauded than lampooned for his reputation as a highly individual and eccentric outsider and for his refusal to conform to the social, doctrinal and philosophical dogmas of his day. He is also more likely to be celebrated for the apparent incommensurability of literary form and theological content in his writings – despite, or rather because of, the recognition that this incommensurability generates the very sensations of disorientation, dissolution, vacancy, laughter and so on that Møller and others registered at the time. Attention to the intersection between art (the way in which Kierkegaard's texts are

written) and communication (what they transmit), that is, has in recent times been heralded for taking us not only 'to the very dividing-asunder of the joints and marrow of his authorship', but also and thereby 'to the cutting edge of his significance for contemporary theology, philosophy, literature and artistic practice' (Pattison 1992: xiii). This changed relationship to the incompatibilities of form and content in Kierkegaard's writings corresponds, too, with a changed sense that their presentation of such topics as personal identity was clairvoyant rather than clownish.

If there has proven to be a certain prophetic veracity to Kierkegaard's comments about his future reception, it is worth asking why. What kind of understanding of the 'eccentric' qualities of Kierkegaard's writings is needed to make available a meaningful engagement with the apparent incommensurability of form and content in those writings and what can we learn about the nature of this eccentricity from Kierkegaard's belief that readers from the future would be more likely to respond appropriately to it?

These are the two questions I wish to address in this article. I propose to do so by analysing in detail a sequence of readings of Kierkegaard that come from a different temporal and cultural context from his own, that focus on the eccentric and refractory nature of his writings, and that in so doing successfully proceed from a persistent attention to the aesthetic qualities of those writings to an apprehension of religious faith. Inspired, too, by a statement Kierkegaard once drafted in relation to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that, 'naar blot een Eneste vilde læse Bogen saaledes, at han tilegner sig den i den væsentlige Inderlighed, saa det tilsidst er tilfældigt, at det er mig, der har skrevet den, fordi han selv producerer den – saa er jeg forstaaet, og er glad' (*SKP* VII[1] B 86) (If only one person were to read the book in such a way that he appropriates it in essential inwardness, then ultimately it is incidental that it is I who have written it, because he himself produces it – then I would be understood and be happy' [*KW* XII.2: 122]), I have chosen readings that take the form of creative works of literature in their own right.

The readings I will be assessing consist of seven poems by the twentieth-century Welsh poet and priest, R. S. Thomas (1913-2000).

Published intermittently over a period of nearly thirty years, these poems constitute arguably the most significant, and certainly one of the most sustained, collections of responses to Kierkegaard as a writer and theological thinker in Anglophone literature. Shaped as literary responses to Kierkegaard in the dual sense that they are themselves works of literature and they respond directly to several of the specifically literary qualities in Kierkegaard's texts, these poems register Thomas's developing awareness of the varieties of religious experience to which the aesthetic practices of Kierkegaard's writings can give access.

Of crucial importance in determining which variety of religious experience becomes available at any one moment in these readings is the figure of the periphery. This figure appears in some form or other in every single poem in the sequence and provides the locus of encounter between reader, text and author in every case. It thereby characterises Kierkegaardian literary activity as something that takes place in a context that is inescapably 'off-to-the-side' and ensures that the process of making meaning out of Kierkegaard's texts is likewise persistently 'eccentric'. The kinds of peripheries Thomas's poems bring into play in their depictions of the act of responding to Kierkegaard are by no means the same throughout, but they acquire new and additional configurations as the sequence progresses. Initially, these peripheries are primarily spatial and cultural. Then they attain a more overtly psychological and spiritual dimension, before finally they play host to a new way of experiencing Kierkegaard's experiments at the outer reaches of literary style as well.

In what follows, I will explicate how every successive configuration of this figure of the periphery as the site of Kierkegaardian literary activity makes available a different experience of the incommensurability between aesthetic form and theological content in Kierkegaard's writings and thus registers a different experience of the incommensurable paradox that lies, in Kierkegaard's view, at the heart of Christian faith. In so doing, I shall elucidate, too, how different conceptions of the eccentricities of Kierkegaard's writings make available different orientations towards Kierkegaard's conception of the eccentricities of religious experience.

Peripheral spaces

In an interview conducted in his late sixties, R. S. Thomas recalled that his acquaintance with Kierkegaard had begun when he was a curate in the early 1940s. 'I discovered one or two of his books in a bookshop … and I just built him up' (Lethbridge 1983: 55). The upbuilding that ensued (the pun is very likely Thomas's own) continued for nearly sixty years and left its mark in interviews, essays, letters and several poems besides the seven which will form the focus of my discussion and in which he refers explicitly to Kierkegaard by name (see, e.g., Lethbridge 1983, Ormond 1971 and Thomas 1978b).

Thomas's access to Kierkegaard's life and writings would have been solely through English-language biographies and translations – primarily those by Alexander Dru, David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie from the late 1930s onwards (Lethbridge 1983: 55). A number of features of Thomas's characterisations of Kierkegaard and his writings – such as his propensity to liken Kierkegaard as both a person and an author to God – are attributable to their mediation through this relatively early phase of Kierkegaard's English-language reception and to Lowrie in particular (Hannay 2013a). As time went by, though, Thomas's Kierkegaard poems also began to highlight elements of their subject's literary style that had only recently started to attract the attention of a younger generation of English-language scholars.

Changing Anglophone scholarship, however, was only one of the influences that ensured Thomas's ongoing dialogue with Kierkegaard adhered to Kierkegaard's notion of literary upbuilding as a process involving author, reader and text alike, and which through its every iteration leaves none of those participants unchanged. Another important influence was the series of geographically peripheral locations Thomas inhabited throughout the duration of his reading of Kierkegaard. Each of these locations marked a response to Thomas's evolving sense of himself as a figure situated at the edges of contemporary society, language and religious faith, and each one provided him with new ways of understanding that situation. The shifting nature of these geographical and existential peripheries gave shifting form, too, to the interpretations of Kierkegaard Thomas

developed in response to those situations. The first of the poems in which Thomas names Kierkegaard, for instance, was written while he was living in Eglwys-fach, a few miles inland from the west coast of Wales. Entitled 'Kierkegaard', and included in the 1966 collection *Pietà*, this poem appeared at a time when Thomas's experiences of living in Eglwys-fach prompted him to express his concerns about the existential threat to Welsh culture in an especially political and embittered form (M. W. Thomas 1992: 107-129).

These concerns had first become pronounced for Thomas twenty or so years previously, around the time he began to read Kierkegaard. For it was while he was working as a curate near the border with England that Thomas first became acutely aware of how the imperialising march across Wales of English language, politics and culture was driving their Welsh equivalents, and thus Welsh identity more generally, ever further to the physical and cultural margins. From that point on, every subsequent parish to which Thomas moved marked a conscious migration westwards away from England, its language and the urbanised, techno-scientific and capitalistic values Thomas believed this language conveyed, and deeper into what he hoped would prove to be 'Welsh Wales' – first to Manafon (1942-54), an isolated farming community in the hill country of mid-Wales, and then to Eglwys-fach (1954-67) nearer the coast.

Thomas had begun to learn Welsh in Manafon in the hope it would give him access to the authentic Welsh life he believed was going on around him, but from which he felt excluded by his parents' decision to raise him as a monoglot English-speaker. Thomas would become fluent in Welsh later in life, but he never felt sufficiently attuned to the Welsh language to compose poetry in what should have been his mother tongue. His move from Manafon to Eglwys-fach in 1954 was supposed to mark a further step on the road to an authentic Welsh-speaking life, but what he experienced there proved to be nothing of the kind. English in language and mores, as well as superficial and hypocritical in spirit, Eglwys-fach hurt Thomas into poems of bitter reproach, in which the speaker of those poems is as often as not positioned in a marginal space – such as a doorway or shore – and isolated from the English and Welsh alike.[2]

It was while he was living at this self-perceived geographical, social and existential periphery that Thomas composed the first two poems in which he mentions Kierkegaard by name. In the second of them, 'A Grave Unvisited', he actively depicts himself reading Kierkegaard from a position on a spatial and cultural margin. The first poem, meanwhile, called 'Kierkegaard', restricts itself to offering a brief biographical portrait of the Dane. By casting Kierkegaard (like Thomas himself) as a religious writer whose works also acquire their distinctive nature from their composition on and in relation to a set of spatial and cultural peripheries, it establishes the groundwork for that later encounter. It is, indeed, with this characterisation of Kierkegaard as a writer seemingly operating at the margins of Denmark that 'Kierkegaard', and with it the whole sequence of Kierkegaard poems, begins:

> And beyond the window Denmark
> Waited but refused to adopt
> This family that wore itself out
> On its conscience, up and down
> In the one room.
> (Thomas 1966: 18)

The poem then proceeds to offer a biographical account of Kierkegaard's life that starts with his father's austere childhood in Jutland, continues through his own broken engagement to Regine Olsen, and concludes with his suffering at the hands of the Press. Every one of these stages on life's way, moreover, repeats the opening characterisation of Kierkegaard as an excluded, confined and rejected figure who persistently experienced life from the margins. In the account of his relationship with Regine Olsen, for instance, we are told the streets of Copenhagen 'emptied / Of their people but for a girl' and that even then Kierkegaard could only stare at her 'Through life's bars'. The poem similarly ends with Kierkegaard responding to the attacks upon him by crawling to 'the monastery of his chaste thought' and offering up 'his crumpled amen'.

Moelwyn Merchant has argued that, 'as the dereliction closes upon Kierkegaard' in this poem, 'his writings become, in an almost

physical sense, his "retreat"' (Merchant 1989: 54). This is an important observation because it identifies what will prove to be a recurrent feature of Thomas's reception of Kierkegaard: his characterisation of Kierkegaard's writings as themselves spaces of existential experience. It is equally crucial to recognise, however, that even in this very first poem about Kierkegaard, it is not only this retreat that is rendered marginal as a result of Thomas's initial positioning of Kierkegaardian literary activity on a geographical periphery on the other side of the window from Denmark; Denmark too loses any ability it might otherwise claim to possess to stand as a geographical, moral or spiritual centre because of its refusal to adopt this family and participate in the life lived in that one room. Pushed away by its rejection of this activity 'beyond the window' – with its conscience thereby relegated to an object of attrition rather than a source of nourishment and its streets emptied of anything of substance or value other than the phenomena of Kierkegaard's own perpetually reiterated concerns – the mutual displacement of this nation state and the Kierkegaard home alike introduces a movement that will recur in every one of Thomas's readings of Kierkegaard, in which the positioning of Kierkegaardian literary activity on one or other kind of periphery unfolds for the reader an experiential field in which everything is decentred and displaced and nothing other than God can occupy its centre.

The next poem in the sequence, 'A Grave Unvisited', makes use of this same spatial and experiential configuration when it sends its speaker in search of Kierkegaard in the same physical environment he had inhabited in 'Kierkegaard'. Published two years after 'Kierkegaard' in 1968 – and inspired by a recent visit to Denmark (Thomas 1997: 68) – 'A Grave Unvisited' takes the form of an hermeneutic quest to find a living and authentic Kierkegaard in the here and now. In the process of doing this, it evaluates two alternative strategies for achieving that goal: one objective and public, the other subjective and private. The objective and public approach is exemplified by the Danish State's attempts to 'anchor' Kierkegaard 'With the heaviness of a nation's / Respectability' by giving him a marble tomb. Dismissive of the implication that Kierkegaard can in any meaningful sense be encountered as a dead body encased in a tomb, or that his spirit would

even then have been willing to reconcile itself to a public narrative that had rejected him (and that he in turn had rejected) in life, the speaker adopts a more independent and private approach instead. Staying clear of this state-sponsored monument – and, indeed, of all the streets and public spaces of central Copenhagen that play host to the nation's impersonal and objective ideologies – the speaker situates himself in the peripheral and littoral spaces of Dragort (Dragør) instead. Here, having adhered to the injunction in Luke's gospel not to look for the living among the dead, the speaker comes to experience a more dynamic and living relationship with Kierkegaard and his texts. 'So I go', the poem concludes

> Up and down with him in his books,
> Hand and hand like a child
> With its father, pausing to stare
> As he did once at the mind's country.
> (Thomas 1968: 9)

This culminating image claims an affinity of approach and understanding between reader and author. It is an affinity that is strengthened still further when one recognises that their shared movement 'up and down' this arena replicates the movement of Kierkegaard 'up and down' the one room at the start of the poem 'Kierkegaard'. Both these spaces, that is – which describe the shared environment of the Kierkegaardian author and the Kierkegaardian reader – are located on a spatial periphery, off to the side of mainstream activity, theory and aesthetics. Just as Kierkegaard produces his works in a room that lies 'beyond the window' from Denmark, so is the productive space of reading Kierkegaard delineated at the end of 'A Grave Unvisited' reached through the speaker's avoidance of the impersonal and aesthetically imitative streets of Copenhagen in favour of the more individualistic, challenging and marginal locality of Dragort at its opening. 'There are places where I have not been', that poem begins

> Deliberately not, like Søren's grave
> In Copenhagen. Seeing the streets
> With their tedious reproduction
> Of all streets, I preferred Dragort,
> The cobbled village with its flowers
> And pantiles by the clear edge
> Of the Baltic, that extinct sea.
> (Thomas 1968: 9)

According to the analysis Kierkegaard provides in *The Present Age*, acting 'deliberately' constitutes a fundamental way in which one can assert one's independence and individuality in the face of the deadening and levelling existence that impersonal public opinion and the dominant routines and prevailing values of contemporary social life threaten to impose upon us (see also M. W. Thomas 1992: 116-119). 'A Grave Unvisited' presents these two alternatives in concretely spatial terms. In doing so, it employs the figure of a geographical periphery to express a specific form of subjectivity: one that is non-conformist, independent and thus individual. Designated as the place of operation of the Kierkegaardian author and reader alike, the set of subject positions this figuration makes available enables the readings there produced to respond to two of the most persistent self-characterisations in Kierkegaard's writings: that they occupy a unique location on the outer perimeters of contemporary literary form; and that they can only be genuinely experienced by a reader who is a 'single individual'.[3]

As we will see in the next section, however, and as is intimated already by the 'cobbled' streets of Dragort, this location of the Kierkegaardian author and reader on a periphery renders neither those subject positions nor the spaces they inhabit stable or comfortable. For just as the periphery is the point at which spatial entities and the identities and ideologies to which they play host start to fracture, so too is the act of placing oneself on a periphery an act of making one's self peripheral.

Peripheral selves

In addition to establishing a subject position for the reader of Kierkegaard's texts that emphasises the desired singleness and individuality of that reader, the location of the site of Kierkegaardian literary activity on a spatial, intellectual and social periphery in the two poems we have looked at so far opens up a specific vista on the nature of Kierkegaard's texts. This vista is of an unsettling, spiritually vexed and internally divided experiential environment that is the correlate of the ultimate incommensurability of aesthetic form and religious content sustained in those texts.

The poem 'Kierkegaard', for instance, begins by setting Kierkegaard in a single room on the other side of the window from Denmark. It then proceeds to perceive alienation and marginalisation in every one of the events in Kierkegaard's life right up to his culminating 'crumpled amen'. This crumpled amen accordingly comes to figure the intermingling of aesthetic qualities on the verge of dissolution ('crumpled') and worshipful religious content ('amen') that characterises Kierkegaard's writings and makes reading them such an unsettling experience. It is a configuration, moreover, that has been in play from the very start of the poem in the seemingly confined and peripheral space of that one room. For having established the visible dimensions of this room, the poem next delineates the creative inner landscape to which it plays host:

> Meanwhile the acres
> Of the imagination grew
> Unhindered, though always they paused
> At that labourer, the indictment
> Of whose gesture was a warped
> Crucifix upon a hill
> In Jutland.
> (Thomas 1966: 18)

These lines present the central crux around which so many of Kierkegaard's writings orbit: of how the imagination, whose function in aesthetic activity is conventionally conceived to be to achieve a harmony

between external and internal phenomena, can ever comprehend or express the exclusively inner life of religious faith.[4] As we have already seen, Kierkegaard stated that his goal in his aesthetic writings had been to effect a movement '*from* "the poet", from the aesthetic … *to* the indication of the most inward qualification of the essentially Christian' (*KW* XXII: 5). As the lines from Thomas's poem 'Kierkegaard' cited above record, however, the aesthetic imagination was for Kierkegaard invariably knocked off-centre by its attempt to engage the central crux at the heart of Christian faith. Thomas's vignette expresses this powerfully. Unfurled from a position that is already spatially, socially and intellectually peripheral, the acres of Kierkegaard's imagination can only present a 'warped' Crucifix in terms that are bewildering in their indirection.

Given this view of the composition of Kierkegaard's texts and of the existential experiences they stage, it is perhaps unsurprising that Thomas's early poems about Kierkegaard all come to a halt – like Kierkegaard's imagination in 'Kierkegaard' – before the incommensurabilities of aesthetics and religion, inside and outside, they recount. This is true even of 'A Grave Unvisited' despite the apparent tranquillity of its closing lines. For just as their shared movement 'up and down' Kierkegaard's books aligns the literary space they inhabit with the one room to the side of Denmark where those books were composed in 'Kierkegaard', so too does the culminating act the reader performs in 'A Grave Unvisited' repeat the unfurling of the decentred acres of the imagination that takes place in the earlier poem. '*Pausing* to stare / As he did once at the mind's country', that is, the reader of Kierkegaard *pauses*, as Kierkegaard's imagination did before the warped Crucifix in Jutland, at the precipice which separates the external, perceptible world of aesthetics and the internal, imperceptible world of the mind, the self and religious faith.

These fissures, which significantly rupture the spatial peripheries Thomas's poems recognise as the site of Kierkegaardian literary activity, have an equally destabilising effect upon the single individual reader Kierkegaard's writings invoke. For by situating that reader at the intersection of outside and inside, body and mind, physical and spiritual, finite and infinite, aesthetics and religion, those writings

accordingly dissect that supposedly indivisible individual and in so doing divest her of the option of dwelling even at the centre of her own being and identity.

'A Grave Unvisited' hints at this fissuring and decentring of the Kierkegaardian reader through the many allusions it contains to specific passages and concepts in Kierkegaard in its closing depiction of a reader pacing up and down with Kierkegaard in his books. The scenario is itself indebted to a passage in Kierkegaard's unfinished work *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* in which a father and son walk hand-in-hand up and down the same room, imagining all the while they are exploring the outside world (*KW* VII: 120-121; *SKP.* IV. B[1] 107). It is its specific characterisation of the act of reading as a movement 'up and down', though, that brings into play Kierkegaard's two key concepts of recognition and the leap of faith. In so doing, it instigates the decentring of the self that Kierkegaard's aesthetic and theological practice seeks to bring about for the author and reader alike.

Repetition is introduced to this scene in two ways: the very act of walking up and down is repetitive in nature and it repeats the movement made by Climacus and his father in Kierkegaard's story, as well as by Kierkegaard himself at the start of Thomas's poem 'Kierkegaard'. That Kierkegaard understood repetition to be a fundamental component of life and of the reading process in particular – which accordingly participates in the decentring of self that true existence requires – is illustrated by Constantin Constantius's account of reading the Book of Job in *Repetition*:

> Skjønt jeg har læst Bogen atter og atter, bliver ethvert Ord mig nyt. Hver Gang jeg kommer til det, fødes det oprindelig eller bliver oprindelig i min Sjæl. (*SKSV* III: 239).
>
> (Although I have read the book again and again, each word remains new to me. Every time I come to it, it is born anew as something original or becomes new and original in my soul. [*KW* VI: 205])

The result of each successive reading, in other words, is that neither author, text nor reader stays the same; not one of them controls, or sits at the centre of, their own or the other participants' identity or meaning.

The movement 'up and down' also introduces the destabilising effects of the Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith' to the act of reading depicted at the end of 'A Grave Unvisited' through its reiteration of the movement Johannes de Silentio ascribes to the knights of infinity in *Fear and Trembling*. De Silentio perceives in this leap a momentary loss of balance – a decentring, if you will – that is itself an expression of a profound alienation of the religious self within the world:

> De gjøre Bevægelsen op efter og falde ned igjen, og ogsaa dette er en ikke usalig Tidsfordriv og ikke uskjønt at see paa. Men hver Gang de falde ned, kunne de ikke strax antage Stillingen, de vakle et Øieblik, og denne Vaklen viser, at de dog ere Fremmede i Verden. (*SKSV* III: 91).
>
> (They make the upward movement and come down again, and this, too, is not an unhappy diversion and is not unlovely to see. But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately, they waver for a moment, and this wavering shows that they are aliens in the world. [*KW* VI: 41])

'A Grave Unvisited' indicates there can be an analogous wavering and sense of alienation in the experience of reading Kierkegaard through its likening of the relationship between author and reader to one between a father and son. As William V. Davis points out, this seemingly close familial relationship is subtly undermined by the use of the strangely impersonal possessive pronoun 'its' rather than 'his' in the phrase 'like a child with its father' and by the quirky and ambiguous use of the conjunction 'and' rather than 'in' in the phrase 'hand and hand' (Davis 2007: 130). To read Kierkegaard in a Kierkegaardian fashion, these lines could be taken as saying, involves a loss of equilibrium, a heightened sense of alienation and a dissolution of any comfortable assumptions about the integrity of one's own identity.

This focus on the consequences for the self of entering the existential world of Kierkegaard's writings becomes even more evident – and fraught – in two poems Thomas published a decade after 'A Grave Unvisited' in the volume *Frequencies* from 1978. Thomas had spent the intervening period in Aberdaron on the Llŷn Peninsula, a narrow strip of land stretched between sea and sky on the furthest edge of Wales. This location had provided Thomas with the setting for several explorations in verse of the border regions between the finite and the infinite, language and silence, humankind and God. It may well have been in part because Thomas was working on *Frequencies* when he decided to retire from the priesthood that Kierkegaard came so prominently to mind once more, since Kierkegaard had considered making the opposite move and becoming a country parson (*PJ* 64). There is in any case no doubt that Kierkegaard's presence is felt like a gathering wave within its pages.

I use this maritime language deliberately because over the course of the ten years that had passed since Thomas left Eglwys-fach for Aberdaron, the physical settings of his poetry had become increasingly less concrete and more fluid. In his poems about Kierkegaard from this period, the topography and physical fabric of Copenhagen fade away and the Kierkegaardian motif of the 'seventy thousand fathoms' of religious faith takes its place as the site over which the single individual reader of Kierkegaard's texts is projected. This re-configuration of the periphery that constitutes the site of Kierkegaardian literary activity from a concrete setting of windows, rooms and streets to a more maritime one of water and shores corresponds, too, with a reconfiguration of the fissures that therein rive the Kierkegaardian self. No longer are the dichotomies of outside and inside, physical and spiritual, finite and infinite, and so on experienced in such rigid, concrete terms. Instead, more fluid terms take their place and express a less fissile but more pervasive instability.

We see this, for instance, in the poem 'Synopsis', which offers an historical review of changing philosophical ideas about the nature of the self. Having begun with Plato and Aristotle, and then proceeded through Spinoza, Hume, Kant and Hegel, 'Synopsis' concludes by defining the self as

that grey subject
of dread that Søren Kierkegaard
depicted crossing its thousands
of fathoms; the beast that rages
through history; that presides smiling
at the councils of the positivists.
(Thomas 1978: 44)

It is left to a poem printed a few pages later, however, to illustrate how the projection of this Kierkegaardian self over such a boundless and indeterminate arena once again decentres, alienates and dismantles our seemingly treasured notions of the single individual self. Called 'Balance', this poem opens with the subject situated once more on a peripheral location: a plank without handrails, anchors or any other means by which to stabilise oneself. 'No piracy', it begins

but there is a plank
to walk over seventy thousand fathoms,
as Kierkegaard would say, and far out
from the land. I have abandoned
my theories, the easier certainties
of belief. There are no handrails to
grasp.
(Thomas 1978: 49)

As the opening 'No piracy' punningly forewarns, the arena of religious faith here projected is one in which no single individual can survive solely by copying the example of another. Not even Kierkegaard or his writings can offer a paradigmatic strategy; they only delineate the nature of the challenge. 'Above / and beyond,' the poem continues

there is the galaxies'
violence, the meaningless wastage
of force, the chaos the blond
hero's leap over my head
brings him nearer to.
(Thomas 1978: 49)

The leap of faith is accordingly presented here as something that every single individual can make only on their own. Where it leads, however, is a place of violence, wastage and chaos in which this single self cannot sustain its inner coherence.

Despite the speaker's proclaimed inability to make this kind of Kierkegaardian leap, he is still confronted with the Kierkegaardian conundrum of how to make the transition from the external, visible world of planks, peninsulas and poems on the one hand to an inner realm of mind and spirit on the other. Despite the shift in topography from the more rigid, concrete peripheries of Copenhagen and its environs in 'Kierkegaard' and 'A Grave Unvisited' to the more fluid liminalities of the Llŷn Peninsula, that is, the incommensurabilities of Kierkegaard's aesthetic strategies and theological commitments continue to project the reader into, rather than beyond, an equally fraught and incommensurable existential environment of pure aporia.

> 'Is there a place / here for the spirit?' the speaker of 'Balance' asks in conclusion.
> Is there time
> on this brief platform for anything
> other than mind's failure to explain itself?

Intriguingly, the next three poems in the sequence answer this question in the affirmative. For them, this place of chaos – in which the single individual self is decentred, alienated and rent asunder – continues to be the existential environment into which Kierkegaard's texts project the reader. Yet it is now also an environment that enables those texts, through the corresponding disintegration of their own incommensurabilities of form and content, to bring the reader into the vicinity of God and the truth. To see how they do this and, not least, how Thomas's poems about Kierkegaard cease to halt at these incommensurabilities, but instead work through them to the kind of religious experience Kierkegaard desired, we need to attend both to the changing style of Thomas's own poetry and to its corresponding re-evaluation of the peripheries of literature and religion in Kierkegaard's conception and practice.

Literary peripheries

At the end of the second volume of Kierkegaard's early work *Either/Or* a sermon is appended entitled 'Det Opbyggelige, der ligger i den Tanke, at mod Gud have vi altid Uret' (*SKSV* II: 301-318) (The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong [*KW* II: 335-354]). This notion that before God we are always in the wrong is one that recurs throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. It is often presented there as a spatial configuration in which God resides at the centre of existence, while individual humans are stationed at various locations off-to-the-side of (and therefore in the wrong before) that central truth. Several of the most distinctive features of Kierkegaard's literary style – his use of indirect communication, duplexity and dialectic, and the many strategies he and his pseudonyms employ to divest themselves of any authority over the meaning of their writings – can accordingly be read as attempts to orientate the reader (like the author) into a position off-to-the-side that correlates with their rightful position off-to-the-side before God.

Crucial for the functioning of this correlation is Kierkegaard's belief that God too only communicates with us indirectly. 'Thi ingen anonym Forfatter kan listigere skjule sig' (No anonymous author can more slyly hide himself), Johannes Climacus states in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 'og ingen Maieutiker omhyggeligere unddrage sig det ligefremme Forhold end Gud' (*SKSV* VII: 204) (and no maieutic can more carefully recede from a direct relation than God can [*KW* XII.1: 243]). This communicative strategy is a reflection of God's and our own respective locations in the universe. It sets the terms by which we are required to reorientate ourselves within this cosmic order if we are to become capable of experiencing God. As Climacus continues

> Han er i Skabningen, overalt i Skabningen, overalt i Skabningen, men ligefremt er han der ikke, og først naar det enkelte Individ vender sig ind i sig selv … bliver han opmærksom og istand til at see Gud. (*SKSV* VII: 204-5)

> (He [God] is in the creation, everywhere in the creation, but he is not there directly, and only when the single individual turns inward into himself … does he become aware and capable of seeing God. [*KW* XII.1: 243])

In other writings, Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors add that this turning inward involves an emptying of the self. 'Først naar den Enkelte har udtømt sig selv i det Uendelige' (only when the individual has emptied himself in the infinite), states Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, 'først da er det Punkt kommet, da Troen kan bryde frem' (*SKSV* III: 119) (only then has the point been reached where faith can break through [*KW* VI: 69]).

To help orientate the reader before God in this manner is one way of understanding the goal of Kierkegaard's writings. To this end, those writings could be held to employ a literary strategy that consists of three sequential stages. First, they draw out the single individual in the reader by taking him or her out of the mainstream. Then, they decentre the reader and dissolve their individuality by riving it on the antinomies of finite and infinite, outside and inside, aesthetics and religion. Finally, and only after they have transported the reader this far, they allow the incommensurable formal and thematic crosspieces of their own literary-theological framework to disintegrate, leaving the receptive reader's thus reconstructed, emptied and abandoned self to rest in the infinity of God. 'Saaledes er vistnok den æsthetiske Produktivitet et Bedrag' (The aesthetic writing is surely a deception), Kierkegaard concluded in a retrospective account of his authorship, 'dog i en anden Forstand en nødvendig Udtømmelse' (*SKSV* XIII: 562) (yet in another sense a necessary emptying [*KW* XXII: 77]).

This in any case is more or less the interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings offered in the final three poems Thomas wrote about Kierkegaard. Published fifteen years after 'Synopsis' and 'Balance' in the 1993 volume *Mass for Hard Times*, the first of them, 'I', sketches out the experiential consequences of this process. I quote this poem in its entirety:

Kierkegaard hinted, Heidegger
agreed: the nominative
is God, a clearing
in thought's forest where truth

breathes, coming at us
like light itself, now
in waves from a great distance,
now in the intimacy of our corpuscles.
(Thomas 1992: 58)

In a configuration that places the individual human self very obviously off-to-the-side both semantically and grammatically even in one of the most basic acts of self-expression – saying 'I' – this poem unambiguously establishes God as 'the nominative' and thus as the centre and meaning of personal and subjective existence, as well as the centre of impersonal and objective existence. That this truth comes at us both from a great distance outside and from an equally intimate place within, meanwhile, further shatters any illusions we might have that we are discrete entities in control of the boundaries and definitions of our own selves.

What underpins this decisive shift in Thomas's poetic readings of Kierkegaard, I would argue, is the explicit association this poem makes between Kierkegaard's literary style on the one hand and his theological commitments on the other. By having Kierkegaard 'hint' at this understanding rather than 'state' it, the poem establishes from the start a recognition of Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication. By presenting what Kierkegaard would have called our 'God-relationship' as a grammatical relationship, meanwhile, it similarly hints at Kierkegaard's belief that a person's aesthetic style, thought and existence are mutually sustaining (e.g. *SKSV* VII: 67 and 309; *KW* XII.1: 86 and 357; Walsh 1998: 154).

Beyond the poems themselves, there is little evidence to explain what enabled Thomas to progress in his reading of Kierkegaard from an apprehension of an overwhelming, yet potentially debilitating, state of religious paradox and crux to an apprehension of truth and God.

The heightened attention Thomas's poems of the 1990s pay to the literary style of Kierkegaard's writings suggests, though, that this is where the key development may have taken place. For until at least as late as 1981 – three years after 'Synopsis' and 'Balance' – Thomas had continued to insist that Kierkegaard had wrongly viewed poetry and religion as incompatible.[5] 'I disagree with his thing about poetry', he stated in an interview that year, 'there's no room for poetry in his system and that sort of thing, I disagree with him there. I like him on the individual' (Lethbridge 1983: 51). One can find similar comments in earlier interviews and essays from the 1970s (e.g. Ormond 1971: 53; Thomas 1978b: 177).

As we have just seen, the poem 'I' from 1993, by contrast, makes a clear analogy between Kierkegaard's theological position and his literary (or 'poetic')[6] style. It is possible Thomas was prompted to change his view on Kierkegaard's understanding of the relationship between literature and religion by the paradigm shift in English-language studies of Kierkegaard that was taking place around the same time, in which the literary qualities of Kierkegaard's writings were beginning to attract much greater attention (Poole 1998: 64-5). It is just as likely, though, that he was prompted to a greater awareness of Kierkegaard's literary style and of the contribution it made to Kierkegaard's theological arguments by the changes he had introduced to his own poetic style since *Frequencies* and his consciousness of the more fluid and dissolving sense of personal identity with which this style accorded.

This, at any rate, is the story told in the next poem in the sequence, 'Fathoms', which appeared two years after 'I' in *No Truce with the Furies*, the final collection Thomas published before his death. Adopting Kierkegaard's practice of representing his writings and God alike as bodies of water into which the reader and/or individual self gaze (e.g. *SKSV* V: 267 and *KW* V: 399 [God]; *SKP* VI: 6416 [Kierkegaard's writings]), 'Fathoms' records three separate stages in its speaker's life in which he dropped his question into the pool of Kierkegaard's work. At each successive stage, the speaker comes to this pool with a different state of mind, a different sense of personal identity and self, and he expresses himself through a different literary style. Each of

these factors accordingly contributes to the different responses each successive reading produces.

The period of the speaker's youth, for instance, is presented in concise, matter-of-fact terms and elicits no response:

> Young I visited
> this pool; asked my question,
> passed on.
> (Thomas 1995: 10)

The middle period is also clear and calm in expression, more reflective in content, slightly more fluid in style, but still controlled in structure. It too is almost equally ineffective in producing a reaction:

> In the middle years
> visited it again. The question
> had sunk down, hardly
> a ripple. To be no longer
> young, yet not to be old
> is a calm without
> equal. The water ticks on,
> but time stands, fingerless.

The final period, meanwhile, is set in a present moment thirty years later. Here the collocation of the speaker's own dissolving identity and the extreme fluidity of the lines in which that identity is expressed make it possible for the speaker to dredge up the truth with Kierkegaard's help:

> Today, thirty years
> later, on the margin
> of eternity, dissolution,
> nothing but the self
> looking up at the self
> looking down, with each
> refusing to become

an object, so with the Dane's
help, from bottomless fathoms
I dredge up the truth.

What 'Fathoms' helps us perceive through its chronology of readings from youth (which we might associate with the time Thomas first discovered Kierkegaard as a curate), through the middle years thirty years earlier (roughly the period when Thomas was living at Eglwys-fach and writing 'Kierkegaard' and 'A Grave Unvisited'), up to the present moment of the 1990s and the poems 'I', 'Fathoms' and 'S. K.', is how these evolving readings bear witness to Kierkegaard's claims that personal subjective experience is correlate with aesthetic style (*SKSV* VII: 86 and 309; *KW* XII.1: 86 and 357).

The style of Thomas's poems had changed dramatically over the decades covered by 'Fathoms' and it had done so in a reciprocal relationship with the changing nature of the places in which Thomas had lived, his changing sense of personal identity, and his changing readings of Kierkegaard.[7] To put this in general terms, Thomas's concrete sense of isolation and exclusion at inland Eglwys-fach corresponded with a strongly denotative poetry of hard edges that projected a solid, if divided, sense of a self who encountered Kierkegaard as a figure also residing at the edges of contemporary society. At Aberdaron on the Llŷn Peninsula, meanwhile, the fluidity of that coastline soon started to spill over into Thomas's poetry, whereupon capital letters disappeared from the start of each line, the rationale governing the endings of those lines became ever more difficult to discern, and Kierkegaard re-emerged as the herald of the individual self projected uncertainly over 7000 fathoms of amorphous sea. In the 1990s, meanwhile, by which point Thomas was living in old age 'on the margin of eternity' at Sarn-y-Plas, a cottage perched precariously over a cliff on the same peninsula, his poetry had acquired an even looser structure, his sense of self had dissolved still further, and he finally felt able to read Kierkegaard in a manner he believed brought him closer to God and the truth.

The culminating expression of this leap in Thomas's reading of Kierkegaard is the final and longest poem in the sequence, 'S. K.' Printed just a few pages after 'Fathoms', this poem closes with

a similar depiction of how the process of reading Kierkegaard in an overtly dialogical manner can bring the reader into the presence of God through the dissolution of the reading self it involves. 'Is prayer / not a glass,' it asks in its final lines,

> that, beginning
> in obscurity as his books
> do, the longer we stare
> into the clearer becomes
> the reflection of a countenance
> in it other than our own?
> (Thomas 1995: 17).

Pitched as it is in the form of a question, the proposition with which the poem comes to a close does not acquire the status of a settled resolution or a consolatory statement of faith. Rather, it is a temporary and tentative response to the unsettling experience through which 'S. K.' has just taken us of trying to make sense of Kierkegaard's books and of undergoing for ourselves the perplexities and instabilities of Kierkegaard's projections of religious faith. 'S. K.' is able to make this encounter with Kierkegaard available to us as an experience rather than an already acquired set of reasoned responses precisely because it replicates several of Kierkegaard's key aesthetic strategies. In doing so, it usefully illustrates how alterations in Thomas's own literary style make possible alternative responses to Kierkegaard's aesthetic practices, including its understanding of the kinds of religious experience to which those practices give access and the role eccentricity plays in both. For this reason, 'S. K.' warrants a closer look.

'R.S.' and 'S.K.'

Kierkegaard himself asserted that his writings derived at least some of their eccentric nature from their prominent use of dialectic. 'Hvad jeg ofte nok har sagt, kan jeg ikke ofte nok gjentage', he noted in 1848, 'jeg er en Digter, men af en ganske egen Art; thi det Dialektiske er mit Væsens Natur-Bestemmelse, og Dialektik pleier ellers just at være

Digteren Fremmed' (*SKP* 9 A 213) (I cannot repeat often enough what I so frequently have said: I am a poet, but a very special kind, for I am by nature dialectical, and as a rule dialectic is precisely what is alien to the poet' [*KW* XXII: 162]). Much of the value of Thomas's long poem 'S. K.' accordingly lies in the way it incorporates Kierkegaardian dialectic as both a thematic concern and a formal structural feature throughout. It does so, moreover, in a manner that highlights this dialectic's capacity to produce a sense of alienation and confusion alongside temporary moments of insight and orientation.

The poem's continual pendulum swing between such apparent dichotomies as order and disorder, clarity and opacity, resolution and dissolution, comprehension and perplexity, and so on is a feature, for a start, of its visual layout. Here, a sense of order and structure is suggested by the manner in which the poem appears to alternate between different sets of observations and positions one might take about Kierkegaard and his writings until it settles on the concluding question quoted above. The visual prompt for this way of comprehending the poem lies in the manner it is set out upon the page. Even though it is not explicitly divided into separate (say, numbered) sections, 'S.K.' progresses through four sets of stanzas, each with its own distinguishable stanzaic form. At the same time, the first and third of these sets hold fast to the left-hand margin, while the second and fourth share the same indentation. In this way, we are prepped to assume that some kind of alternation is in play between the stanzas lined up on one side of the page and those lined up on the other.[8] In practice, though, there is little in the content of any of these sets of stanzas to uphold this assumption. Rather – with the exception of the second set, which focuses almost exclusively on Kierkegaard's relationship to Regine Olsen – they all blend together the poem's three primary themes of Kierkegaard's life, Kierkegaard's theology and Kierkegaard's writing.

Through its visual layout alone, then, the poem makes available to us the experience of holding in tension a preliminary perception of a beautifully orchestrated structural order on the one hand and the collapse that attends the instantaneous erosion of its internal boundaries on the other. Swinging thus constantly between the sensation of having grasped something and at the same time of having let it slip,

between the transformed understanding that can attend the perceived erosion of conceptual boundaries and the state of sheer perplexity that attends the same phenomenon, we are awarded in 'S. K.' an analogous experience to the one Kierkegaard's writings themselves give us as they too alternately assert, resolve and/or collapse the boundaries between Kierkegaard's three purported realms of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.

These dialectical alternations inform the poem's presentation of its subject matter as well. At one point in the poem, for instance, Kierkegaard's thought is seemingly held fast for a moment when it is said to have been 'brought to bay'. Yet what brings it to this apparent holding place is 'a truth / as inscrutable as its reflection'. A similar combination of a surface clarity destabilised by its inherently fluid nature (rendered present in the previous example both by the use of the metaphor 'bay' to designate thought's momentary anchorage and by the striking double meaning of the word 'reflection') is likewise at work in the poem's characterisation of Kierkegaard's literary style. 'The limpidity of his prose', the poem declares, 'had a cerebral gloss / prohibitive of transparence'. A 'gloss,' as Davis (2007: 138) observes, can mean both 'an explanation' and 'a covering over'. Indeed, as this parallelism between its presentation of Kierkegaard's thought and his writing style suggests, the poem toys throughout with an analogy between the two poles that define the alpha and omega of Kierkegaard's project: his aesthetic strategies and genuine religious faith. Yet even when these poles are brought most closely into line, the space they open up is fluid and insubstantial, host to an all but invisible author and God alike. 'Who were his [Kierkegaard's] teachers?' the poem asks

> He learned
> his anonymity from God himself,
>
> leaving his readers, as God
> leaves the reader in life's
>
> book to grope for the meaning
> that will be quicksilver in the hand.

The culminating evocation here of a hand as a figure of the interpretative process might remind us of the final lines of 'A Grave Unvisited', in which the speaker of the poem walked in a simultaneously close and yet also strangely displaced relationship 'hand and hand' with Kierkegaard in his books. It recalls, too, the lack of handrails that accompany the depiction of the leap of faith in 'Balances' and Kierkegaard's own claim that his two parallel series of pseudonymous and signed works were issued one with the right hand, the other with the left (*SKP* X[1] A 351; *KW* XXII: 193). At any rate, it is striking that 'S.K.' proceeds immediately after these lines – in which the task of grasping the intangible meaning of Kierkegaard's and God's books alike is handed over to the groping reader – to a set of stanzas about Kierkegaard's relationship to Regine Olsen. This is striking not least because Kierkegaard attributed to Regine his notion of 'the single individual reader' to whom all his books were ultimately addressed and only in the necessarily decentred positionality of which he believed anyone could comprehend either his books or the true inwardness of Christian faith. Indeed, in reference to her later married name of Regine Schlegel, Kierkegaard even contemplated dedicating *On My Work as an Author* and, with it, the whole of his authorship 'To R. S.' (*SKP* X[5] B 263; *KW* XII: 257).

Whether or not Thomas was conscious of Kierkegaard's fortuitous intention to dedicate his work to someone who shared his own trademark initials, Regine does in certain respects function as a paradigmatic reader of Kierkegaard in 'S. K.' Like us, that is, she is presented as experiencing Kierkegaard's practice of simultaneously offering and withholding a relationship; like us, she is presented with the challenge of seeing beyond his public gaiety to the 'shirt of nettles' that troubled him beneath; and like us, she is presented with the seemingly impossible task of guessing (despite the advantage of 'her moonlight hair') that 'no apparent / lunatic was ever more sane'. Pushed to the side in a place of uncertainty and apparent exclusion by Kierkegaard's sometimes incomprehensible, and persistently incommensurable, dialectics, that is, any reader is likely to misconstrue the inner pathos to which the eccentricity of his literary style and style of personal existence points as she gropes for a meaning that slips

constantly through her hands.

This uncomfortable existential space off-to-the-side into which the reader of Kierkegaard is manoeuvred by the dialectical structure of Kierkegaard's writings and his conception of religious faith (at least as these things are portrayed and enacted in 'S. K.') corresponds with the *confinium*, or border region, from which a number of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors claim to write. The nature of each of these *confinia* depends on where it is situated in relation to Kierkegaard's three realms of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Each of them, moreover, is expressed through a different literary mode. As Johannes Climacus describes them in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

> Der er tre Existents-Sphærer: den æsthetiske, den ethiske, den religieuse. Til disse svare to Confinier: Ironie er Confiniet imellem det Æsthetiske og Ethiske; Humor Confiniet mellem det Ethiske og det Religieuse. (*SKSV* VII: 436)
>
> (There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there is a respectively corresponding *confinium*: irony is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical; humour is the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious. [XII.1: 501-2])

In keeping with many modern responses to Kierkegaard, 'S.K.' tends to probe primarily at a border region Climacus does not here mention: the one between the aesthetic and the religious. In the poem, this *confinium* constitutes a positionality in which humour and lunacy are at times difficult to distinguish. 'His laughter', it states, 'was that // of an author out of the asylum of his genius'. Møller, we might recall, regarded the aesthetic practices of *Stages on Life's Way* as a form of idiotic clowning capable of conveying nothing more than a meaningless hole at its centre. 'S. K.', on the other hand, identifies this laughter as both coming from and opening up a highly eccentric interpretative and existential position off-to-the-side whose abnegations and dissolutions are crucial components in the movement Kierkegaard desired from the aesthetic to the religious:

He was the first
of the Surrealists, picturing
our condition with the draughtsmanship

of a Dalí, but under
a pseudonym always.

One of the characteristics of Surrealism is its propensity to warp boundaries in a manner that is supposedly not possible in the 'real' world of everyday existence.[9] 'S. K.' acknowledges this by associating Kierkegaard's surrealism with his practice of writing 'under the name of a lie', to give the word 'pseudonym' its full etymological meaning. In doing so, it gestures towards one vital respect in which Kierkegaard's seemingly eccentric aesthetic practice makes possible his theological goals. For as Kierkegaard himself explained in *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, 'fra den hele Forfatter-Virksomheds totale Synspunkt er den æsthetiske Produktivitet et Bedrag, og heri "Pseudonymitetens" dybere Betydning' (from the total point of view of my whole work as an author, the aesthetic writing is a deception, and herein is the deeper significance of the *pseudonymity*'). But, he warns, 'man lade sig ikke bedrage af det Ord "Bedrag"' (do not be deceived by the word *deception*):

> Man kan bedrage et Menneske for det Sande, og man kan, for at erindre om gamle Socrates, bedrage et Menneske ind i det Sande. Ja, egentligen kan man kun ene paa denne Maade bringe et Menneske, der er i en Indbildning, ind i det Sande, ved at bedrage ham. (*SKSV* XIII: 541)

> (One can deceive a person out of what is true, and – to recall old Socrates – one can deceive a person into what is true. Yes, in only this way can a deluded person actually be brought into what is true – by deceiving him. [*KW* XXII: 53])

In this, these lines from 'S. K.' might be taken to imply, the true value of Kierkegaard's eccentric style potentially lies.

Concluding Postscript

The understanding of Kierkegaard I have elucidated here unfolds in a sequence of seven poems in which Kierkegaard is mentioned by name by the twentieth-century Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000). Composed over a period of nearly thirty years, these poems repeatedly engage the distinctly literary qualities of Kierkegaard's writings and thereby record Thomas's developing sense of the kinds of religious experiences to which those qualities give access. The first four poems in this sequence interpret the incommensurability of literary style and religious content in Kierkegaard's writings as both a response to and a way of making experientially available the incommensurable crux that lies at the heart of Christian faith: the impossible paradox of a spatially and temporally boundless God incarnate in finite and mortal form. All four of them duly come to a halt with these incommensurabilities of form, content and faith, and with the painful existential sense of disorientation and self-alienation to which they give space. The three poems that remain, by contrast, treat these same incommensurabilities not as their end but as their point of departure. In them, the ultimate collapse of the unsustainable interlacing of form and content that props up Kierkegaard's literary edifices precipitates a corresponding collapse in the dichotomies of literature and religion, inside and outside, finite and infinite that would otherwise stand in the way of Kierkegaard's stated intention of leading his reader through his writings into the proximity of God and the truth.

Every one of these seven poems, in short, produces a reading of Kierkegaard that correlates the literary style of his works with their theological content. What they also share, and what arguably determines the precise nature of the correlation of style and content they enact, is their investment in one or other figure of the periphery. These figures are of three kinds: peripheries of space, peripheries of the self and peripheries of literary style. This is not necessarily the order in which these figures make their appearance in Thomas's sequence, but it is the order in which they rise to prominence and thus give the sequence its evolving nature. Each successive figure, that is, constitutes an important staging post on the interpretative journey that ends up with

Thomas producing readings of Kierkegaard's writings that successfully experience their incommensurability of form and content as a means of experiencing God.

It would be absurd to argue that the impressive upbuilding these seven poems trace in Thomas's long-standing engagement with Kierkegaard owes its moments of insight and meaningful existential experience solely or even primarily to Thomas's status as a future rather than a contemporary reader of Kierkegaard. Nonetheless, Thomas's distance from Kierkegaard in time, culture, language and other respects at the very least correlated with, and arguably buttressed, his sensation that to read Kierkegaard was inevitably to do so from a position off-to-the-side. The readings of Kierkegaard these poems provide accordingly offer useful examples of what it might mean to analyse Kierkegaard's writings from an evidently eccentric perspective and thus for and through their eccentric qualities. It is in this – in their demonstration of how aesthetic practice and theological content in Kierkegaard's writings might interact and how we might set that 'inner pathos I'd have thought could move stones' in motion – rather than in their individual concrete results, that the value of reading Kierkegaard through his subsequent reception chiefly resides.[10]

Endnotes

[1] All quotations in this paragraph come from the same journal entry. For reasons of space, but also because this article is concerned primarily with readings of Kierkegaard that were mediated exclusively through English translation, I have only provided the Danish original for the longer quotations from Kierkegaard and Møller and for those instances where each of these authors' particular choice of vocabulary is especially significant.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of the sense of alienation Thomas felt even within Wales during this period see Brown 2013: 40-69.

[3] Kierkegaard's *Opbyggelige Taler* (*Upbuilding Discourses*) all begin by identifying their reader as a single individual.

[4] See, for instance, *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (*Stages on Life's Way*) VI: 411: 'Poesien ligger i Commensurabiliteten af det Udvortes og Indvortes, og den viser derfor Resultatet i det Synlige … Det Religieuse ligger i det Indvortes. Her kan da

Resultatet ikke vises i det Udvortes' (Poetry consists in the commensuration of the outer and the inner, and it therefore shows a visible result … The religious lies in the internal. Here the result cannot be shown in the external. [*KW* XI:441])

[5] Thomas himself, by contrast, was unequivocal in his belief that 'Poetry is religion, religion is poetry' (Ormond 1971: 53).

[6] For Kierkegaard, the terms 'literary' and 'poetic' were almost synonymous, as Thomas would have understood from Lowrie. See Lowrie 2013: 165.

[7] For a fuller discussion of the evolution of Thomas's poetic style, see Westover 2011.

[8] One might alternatively suggest that the poem divides into two corresponding parts on the basis that the total number of stanzas in the first and second sets (7+3) is the same as in the third and fourth (9+1).

[9] Thomas 2016 demonstrates Thomas's considerable interest at this time in Surrealist paintings and in the possibilities of meaning their experiments with artistic form opened up.

[10] I owe a special debt of gratitude to my colleagues Geir Petter Hjorthol and Jan Inge Sørbø. Their precise and detailed commentary on earlier drafts helped me see and understand so much more about Søren Kierkegaard, R. S. Thomas and the relationship between them than I could possibly have managed on my own. Thanks are also due to Geir Helge Nilsen at Volda University College library, whose uplifting assistance saved me from much last-minute fear and trembling.

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