

Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire: Rhetoric and Performance in a Theology of Eros. By Carl S. Hughes. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 272pp. Hardback, \$55.00.

In *Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire: Rhetoric and Performance in a Theology of Eros* Carl S. Hughes develops an original approach to Søren Kierkegaard's religious writings. As is well known, Kierkegaard published these religious writings under his own name. Some interpreters take this to mean that he no longer relies on the poetics of indirect communication that underlies his pseudonymous works. According to them, the religious writings finally formulate Kierkegaard's true views in a direct and unambiguous way. Others have suggested that these religious writings are just as indirect as all the others. Hughes belongs to the second camp. In his illuminating book, he convincingly shows that the indirect method of writing is not undermining the religious content of Kierkegaard's works, as is feared by many interpreters from the first camp, but is essential for sustaining it. That is why Hughes believes that Kierkegaard's indirect mode of writing is of vital importance for contemporary theology as a discipline.

In Hughes' reading, Kierkegaard's oeuvre becomes both a provocation and a resource for contemporary theology. A provocation because it challenges all modes of writing that try to give an objective and systematic account of religious truths. A resource because it introduces an alternative mode of writing that aims to affect and transform the reader, rather than to transfer a pre-determined doctrine. According to Hughes, this alternative mode of writing is more in line with what he views as the main task of contemporary theology: the elicitation of desire. He bases this understanding of theology on an extensive reading of a selection of Kierkegaard's works. Hughes thesis is twofold. (i) In terms of rhetoric, Kierkegaard develops a powerful form of writing that relies on subjective 'stagings of desire', rather than falling back on objective representations of an already established religious content. (ii) In terms of theological substance, Kierkegaard conceives faith in terms of an insatiable desire that will never be satisfied, but can only be deepened. For Hughes, these two theses go hand in hand. The rhetoric of staging is necessary to affect the reader in such a way that faith can only be realized as an active desire that finds no resting place. Otherwise faith would become a doctrine that has to be rejected or approved instead of being taken up as a subjective task. In order to understand this approach, the two main notions it brings into play—staging and desire—will need further elucidation.

Hughes argues in his introduction that '[d]espite all of Kierkegaard's criticisms of the Romantic tradition in *The Concept of Irony*, he nonetheless embraces two of its central themes: longing and the fragmentary stagings that incite it' (p. 40). Hence, he views *The Concept of Irony* as a paradigm for interpreting the relation between the dramaturgy of stagings (rhetorical dimension) and faith as desire (theological dimension). In this reading, Kierkegaard's project should not be understood as an attempt to tone down or master the ironic playfulness and the fragmentary mode of writing that dominated German Romanticism. On the contrary, Kierkegaard radicalizes these romantic tendencies. In Romantic literature, the infinite desire that is set in motion by irony ultimately finds a resting place in the imaginative dream worlds it has created as a deification of reality. According to Hughes, Kierkegaard radicalizes the restless irony of the Romantic tradition by making sure that it can never be

satisfied, not even in the most fantastic dream worlds. It is here that the elusive notion of desire comes in.

Traditionally, desire is conceived as a longing that (i) is generated by a finite lack; (ii) is directed towards a determinate goal; and (iii) reaches its end when it has been fulfilled. It is clear from the start that Hughes argues for an alternative notion of desire. He does so as part of a polemic against the influential distinction between *eros* and *agape* that was introduced by the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren. Through a critique of the standard English translations, Hughes argues that this distinction has been wrongly projected on Kierkegaard's works. This created the mistaken impression that Kierkegaard rejects human *eros* (desire) in favour of divine *agape*. Hughes convincingly argues that there is no actual basis for such a claim. On the contrary, he believes that the elicitation of human *eros* is the ultimate aim of Kierkegaard's works. Although Hughes devotes a lot of energy to the refutation of the one-sided and rather simplistic viewpoint of Nygren, he has much less to say about the alternative conception of desire that is propagated by him. It is only in passing that he compares this alternative conception to what Levinas has called a 'metaphysical desire'. Instead of being generated by a lack, this type of desire is based on an infinite abundance. As Levinas points out, it is not directed towards a specific object, but always moves towards an unfamiliar and undetermined Other that defies representation and cannot be possessed. Hence this type of desire does not promise any form of satisfaction or fulfillment, but is by nature insatiable. In my view, Hughes' discussion of desire would have benefited from a more extensive encounter with the work of Levinas. As it is now, it is not fully clear how the relation between the divine Other and desire should be understood. What is the status of this divine Other? Is it similar to the traditional conceptions of God? Or do we have to understand the Other in the sense that Levinas has given to this term?

According to Hughes, Kierkegaard brings desire into play by developing a theatrical mode of writing that goes beyond the Romantic poetics of fragmentary writing. To conceptualize this theatrical mode of writing, Hughes introduces the notion 'staging', which figures so prominently in the title of his book. He does not really define this notion, but draws on a number of its lexical meanings, the most important of which are related to the theater. On the one hand, staging refers to the theatrical techniques that Kierkegaard employs in his works. On the other hand, it signifies 'an action that anticipates or is preparatory to a second, greater action after or beyond it' (p. 6). In the first chapter, Hughes explicitly discusses Kierkegaard's relation to theater. He focuses on the first part of *Either/Or*, consisting in the papers of Aesthete A (one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms). Among these papers is a review of the play *Les Premieres Amours ou Les Souvenirs d'enfance* (*First Love or Childhood Memories*), a vaudeville that was originally written by the French playwright Eugène Scribe and that was performed in a Danish version in the Royal Theater of Copenhagen around 1831. Although Kierkegaard is perfectly aware of the superficial nature of Scribe's vaudeville, his pseudonym unblushingly praises it as a masterpiece. There is a good reason for this. Because of its superficial nature, the vaudeville necessarily relies on a dramaturgy that is not based on representation. In order to portray superficial characters that are immersed in comic situations, it would make no sense to give a coherent and consistent representation of lifelike people. Instead, the actors have to transform themselves into a surface that permits contradictory qualities, without ever giving

rise to definite and finalized impression. Hughes defines this dramaturgy as ‘confronting spectators with contradictions and demanding that they relate to them with desire’ (p. 78). In this way, he interprets the relation between the spectator and the play in terms of mimetic desire (a term that seems to echo René Girard, even though his name is not mentioned). This notion, that is never really explained, more or less indicates what Hughes means when he talks about a staging of desire. By deliberately creating contradictions, Kierkegaard elicits a passionate response from the reader. This response has the form of a mimetic desire that never finds a resting place, but results in an endless process of longing. Hughes believes that in his later works Kierkegaard no longer focuses on the aesthetic and shallow content of vaudevilles, but keeps relying on the dramaturgical principles underlying them. This becomes particularly clear in the main part of the book, in which Hughes moves from Scribe’s theatrical performance to the liturgical performances in the church.

In chapters 2–4, Hughes develops an extensive interpretation of the Eucharistic discourses, which are part of a series of religious writings that Kierkegaard published under his own name. These chapters form the heart of the book and it is there that Hughes’ approach really comes to fruit. As he argues, the Eucharistic discourses ‘conjure the aesthetic and liturgical setting of the Friday Eucharist service’ (p. 83) in the national cathedral of Denmark, Copenhagen’s Vor Frue Kirke (Church of Our Lady). Several of the discourses were actually delivered in this cathedral. According to Hughes, a reading of the Eucharistic discourses ‘requires placing oneself imaginatively in the theaters they construct’ (p. 83). It is only within the implied context of the cathedral that these texts become liturgical performances. This performative side is not inherent to the texts as such, but only emerges after reconstructing the context that is implied by them. This context creates an imaginary space in which the performance can be played out. For that reason, Hughes thinks it necessary to give a detailed description of the choreography of the Friday morning services in Vor Frue Kirke. Moreover, he also carefully describes the aesthetic setting of this church, including the monumental white marble statues of Christ and his apostles that were devised by Bertel Thorvaldsen. To Hughes’ mind, the readers need to know about this context to bring Kierkegaard’s stagings to fruit. The advantages of this approach become most visible in chapter 4, in which he analyses ‘the most vividly theatrical’ (p. 115) of the Eucharistic Discourses: ‘The Woman Who Was a Sinner: Luke 7:37ff’. Hughes interprets this discourse as an invitation for the readers to put themselves in the position of the sinful woman, both physically and psychologically. Kierkegaard forces his readers to react to the story by incorporating the woman’s desire and becoming transformed by it. In chapter 5, the approach of staging desire is applied to *Works of Love*. The book concludes with a brief reflection on Kierkegaard’s importance for contemporary theology.

By highlighting Kierkegaard’s theatrical mode of writing, Hughes has developed an intriguing and illuminating reading of the Eucharistic discourses. I do have some small reservations though. As primarily a theologian, Hughes is more invested in the liturgical performances that take place in the church than in the theatrical performances that occur in the theater. Nevertheless, I believe his interpretation would have benefitted from a more detailed analysis of the theatrical techniques that Kierkegaard conceptualizes and employs. As it is now, the subtle concepts that Kierkegaard introduces to reflect on these techniques—for example, contradiction, occasion,

and repetition—are only briefly addressed, without being analysed to their full extent.

doi:10.1093/litthe/frv017

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