

THE LILY'S TONGUE

In my household there are two Franceses: one is a mother, one is a nanny, or as Plato would call her, a nurse. They have been talking, over tea, while the baby nurses, about how to write an introduction. It's a comforting thing to do, to talk and nurse with the winter sun coming through the front windows later into the afternoon each week. Especially because it means the baby, who goes out for a walk with one Frances, always comes back to the other Frances before she is finished her writing for the day, to be held for a moment. The introduction takes its place at the front of this book, so that the book might be sent out to whichever nurse or reader picks it up, without coming back for further explanations over tea. And the book is about the way a text may be taken up and read, carried or borne, as Søren Kierkegaard describes it in the Lily Discourses, four essays he wrote between 1846 and 1851, on the Gospel passage Matthew 6:24–34. The reader is the only one, according to Kierkegaard, who can grant the text authority. In introducing the first Lily Discourse Kierkegaard writes a preface that condenses this idea into the phrase “the *significance of appropriation*”:

Although this little book is without the *authority* of the teacher, a *superfluidity*, *insignificant* like the lily and the bird—oh, would that it were so!—yet by finding the only thing it seeks, a good place, it hopes to find the *significance of appropriation* for that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader.¹

The book is “without authority” and “insignificant” unless the reader makes it otherwise. Unless it is read, the book is just paper with marks on it; and when it is read those marks turn into words and sentences, but not necessarily into sense; and whatever sense might be made of it, what would make it matter? Kierkegaard introduces the first of the Lily Discourses by saying that it is possible for the reader to grant the text authority: by giving it the “significance of appropriation,” by appropriating it, by making the text her own, what is proper to her. Only, the “proper” is what is at stake in the Lily

Discourses, the “own” is precisely that which shifts, changes, turns, and acts in an improper appropriation that Kierkegaard is describing here. It is an “own” that holds without possessing, the way a nurse holds.

As for the good place the book seeks, like the moment it no doubt waits for, it would not be good in any sense drawn by domestic propriety, nor by bourgeois or professorial ambition. Whether it is in the front room of a rosy apartment or out in a field, the single individual who responds to Kierkegaard’s call as reader, does so in a concrete setting. A good place would be that *setting* which allows the reader to turn, appropriate, and act. But it is also appropriation that *founds* such a setting, marking a place and time in such a way that it changes the pattern of reading.

The preface above is itself the site of a reading that is exemplary. Over or in between the claim that significance is a matter of appropriation, that appropriation depends on a good place, an interruption pushes in in dashes. It is as if the author reread his own words, at a different place or time, or at least in a different breath, and left a comment like a sigh or a wish. Just where authorship should be most authoritative, in the one sentence that is directly followed by a signature—“S.K.”—in this very sentence which forms the preface a dialogue is introduced, an exchange of writing and reading: “Oh,” writes S.K., “would that it were so!”

“Although this little book is without the *authority* of the teacher, a *superfluidity*, *insignificant* like the lily and the bird—oh, would that it were so!” It is *not* the case, a voice interjects; it is not the case that the book is without authority, *if only* it were so. But it is not the case, since it has *already* found a reader. The reader is S.K., who signs the preface, the author himself, or the one who would be “the author” if he could be strictly contained by his signature, if his signature didn’t double in the trace of a reading or rereading. But if the S.K. who reads the preface is thereby able to distinguish between the book and the superfluidity of the lily and the bird, is able to hold the book from overflow for just a moment, is able to attribute an authority, it is by means of an appropriation that is most improper. Authors are not supposed to appropriate; the authority they confer is supposed to be by writing, not reading, by signature, not interruption. If the book is not in fact without authority, then, it is an authority that may not be immediately recognized. It is not an authority of presence, but of exchange or response, if such a thing can still be called “authority”: eventually Kierkegaard will call it “obedience.”

The interruption in the preface is exemplary because it marks the way appropriation is *always* inappropriate, significance is *always* superfluous, and authority is *always* something granted by the reader rather than the author. Thus the interruption calls attention to the way the distinction between

“insignificance” and “significance” is not so easy to draw: if only it were the case that this book was insignificant such that another might be truly significant, it says. If only it were the case that there were some appropriation in which the proper was not split. But there is not.

By withholding his signature from the pseudonymous texts Kierkegaard drew attention to his signed works, and by asserting over and over again that even these signed works were written “without authority” Kierkegaard positioned the Gospel as the authoritative text. But by choosing the place in the Gospel where it turns to, where it splits into, the lily and the bird, the place where it flowers, where it takes flight, by choosing this place to ask about authority, Kierkegaard shows that the chain of deferral that started with the pseudonyms does not stop with Matthew. Instead of asking, “How does the Gospel speak?” Kierkegaard puts his question in terms of the lily, and asks, “How does the Gospel’s lily speak?” That is to say, Kierkegaard investigates textual authority by asking about the lily’s tongue.

This phenomenon could almost be taken as incidental in the first Discourse, it could almost be dismissed as Kierkegaard’s lyricism (to be opposed to his philosophy), we could almost say Kierkegaard chose the lily passage in the Gospel because he liked to write about nature. But by the fourth Discourse Kierkegaard says explicitly that the Gospel *must* speak through the lily. Without the lily’s tongue there would be no Gospel, there would be no authority. The lily is not a pedagogical tool any more than it is an embellishment. It is a flowering without which there would be no meaning, a flowering which contaminates meaning incorrigibly. The Lily Discourses thus take up their place in the tradition of texts that investigate the relation between figure and authority, a tradition that includes Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” and, later, Jacques Derrida’s “White Mythology.” To say the lily in the Gospel is authoritative requires a rethinking, not only of authority, but also of the lily. The lily is not simply figural or merely symbolic. Instead, the lily’s tongue, that which allows the lily to speak, undoes the opposition between the figural and the proper.

It is by missing or misunderstanding this point that so much scholarship on the topic of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication has been polemical but barren. If “indirect communication” is the name for the way a text speaks to a reader *only* through her reading, or only by appropriation in a good place, then all texts, including the Gospel, communicate indirectly. Nowhere is it more evident that *even* the Gospel communicates indirectly than in the passage where the lily and the bird appear. In this sense Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication” is the subject of the present book. But this is not how most scholars have understood indirect communication.

Scholarship which would take the lily to be a figure, but leaves the brace figure proper unruffled, has repeatedly fallen into one of two traps. On the one side are those who argue that Kierkegaard's texts have no proper meaning, and are written for the sake of the writing only; on the other, those who claim that Kierkegaard's writings are meant to make each of his readers better people, and so not only do they have a meaning, their meaning is virtue itself.² In this way, "indirect communication" has meant "no communication" to some, and "ethical communication" to others. For both sets, Kierkegaard, as author, is in control of his text's meaning: either using figure for figure's sake, in which case nothing comes of it; or using it for the proper, a pedagogic metaphor or educational play that has near quantifiable results—in other words, nothing new comes of it.

Instead, Kierkegaard is precisely investigating the place and the moment in language in which something that isn't already known and controlled can come to be, the way, for instance, a message came to the Virgin Mary, via Gabriel, who held a lily. If the lily has a tongue, a language, if it can speak, it is because the lily is the sign of annunciation. It is neither figural nor proper, but that which makes these polarities of sense possible.

When the Lily Discourses are discussed in scholarship, however, they are particularly likely to inspire unreflective references to figure, symbol, or metaphor. This is despite Kierkegaard's explicit and repeated assertion that the lily is a *teacher* and *not* a symbol. Kierkegaard calls the lily and the bird "*Forbilleder*," *archi*-images or prototypes, as opposed to "*Sindbilleder*," sense-images or symbols. But passages such as the one below have led scholars to fall back on the established and safe philosophical view in which lilies are figures that correspond to something proper. Kierkegaard writes in the fourth Lily Discourse:

In order, however, that for us human beings the matter does not become all too earnest, deadly with anxiety, [Christ] draws our attention away from himself and directs it toward something else, almost as if it were an encouragement, a diversion: "Consider the lilies of the field; look at the birds of the air." Consequently, he does not say: "No one can serve two masters . . . look at me"; no, he says, "No one can serve two masters . . . look at the lilies of the field; consider the birds of the air." He could with truth, with infinitely greater truth, if you please, have said, "Look at me." The lilies and the birds really do not express anything, and only he is the truth of what the lily and the bird symbolize. But then the earnestness would have become deadly. For this reason he uses the lily and the bird. Yet the earnestness remains, because the earnestness is that he says it. (*FSE*, 179)

By picking out a piece of this passage, commentators have claimed that, for Kierkegaard, the lily is only a symbol: "What the lily and the bird symbolize." But this is a mistake. In this passage Kierkegaard imagines that Christ had *not* turned us to the lily and the bird in the way he did, that the Gospel passage did *not* say, "Look at the lilies of the field; consider the birds of the air." Had this been the case we would *not* have Matthew 6:24–34, and neither would we have the four Lily Discourses. Most obviously, had Matthew *not* quoted Christ turning us to the lily and the bird, we would *not* be considering the lily, along with Kierkegaard. It follows, then, that we *cannot* assume that we are to understand the lily as symbol of Christ.

But this would not just be a problem for scholarly interpretation of the (nonexistent) Gospel passage. If Christ had not turned us to the lily in the way he did, if the Gospel did not instruct us to consider the lily, if the lily did not express anything, then the matter would become "deadly with anxiety," and further, "the earnestness would have become deadly." If the Gospel did not speak through the lily, there would be no speech, there would be nothing, there would be death. There would not be figure and there would not be ethical lesson, because both are made possible by the lily. That is the importance of the lily's tongue, which Kierkegaard discovers and demonstrates in the Lily Discourses.



Here is the passage, Matthew 24–34, to which, year after year, Kierkegaard responded in discourse after discourse:

No one can serve two masters, for he must either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat and what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they sow not and reap not and gather not into barns, and your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more than they? But who among you can add one foot to his growth even though he worries about it? And why do you worry about clothing? Look at the lilies in the field, how they grow; they do not work, do not spin. But I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed as one of these. If, then, God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the stove, would he not much more clothe you, you of little faith? Therefore you should

not worry and say, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" The pagans seek all these things; your heavenly father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness; then all these things will be added unto you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The lilies tell the listener not to worry about tomorrow. That is, they tell the listener not to try to control tomorrow, since no spinning will ensure beauty tomorrow, just as no sowing and reaping and gathering will ensure nourishment tomorrow. But they also tell the listener that there is beauty to be found—much more than Solomon's clothing and again much more than the lily's—and there is nourishment to be had—much more than food. In 1847 Kierkegaard wrote his first full response to this announcement of sorrow and joy. He called it "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air." It was published on the thirteenth of March in 1847, as the second part of the three-part volume *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. In the next four years, during which he wrote, amongst other books, *Works of Love* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard also wrote another three essays on the lily and bird in Matthew.

The four chapters of this book are each devoted to one of the Lily Discourses, proceeding in chronological order. Chapter 1, "Glass Birds," is about the first Lily Discourse, which I refer to as "What We Learn." A year later, in 1848, "The Cares of the Pagans" was published as the first part of the volume *Christian Discourses*.³ It is the subject of chapter 2, "Paper Flowers." Chapter 3, "The Child," is about "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air," which was published as a complete little book in 1849, though the Hong translation collects it in the volume *Without Authority*.⁴ I refer to it as "The Lily in the Field." Chapter 4, "Golden Leaves," is about the fourth Lily Discourse, "Christ as Archi-Image." Kierkegaard decided not to publish it, but it was finished as part of the volume *Judge for Yourself!* (the second series of *For Self Examination*) in 1851.⁵

The discourses do not build upon one another as an argument, and neither do they progress as if in the natural growth of Kierkegaard's thought. But they do start with an almighty positing: in an invocation of the *fiat lux* Kierkegaard concludes the first discourse with a sublime "let there be dark." The incantations of praise that make up the second discourse, the obedient listening of the third discourse, and the nonmimetic imitation of the fourth discourse, are all carried out in this blackness. That is to say, each time the lily speaks it is not the natural lily reflecting the white of the natural sun, but

the Gospel's lily, speaking in the black of ink on paper, in language. And yet the fourth discourse emphasizes more than the others that the reading which is required is also an acting, that the listener must also be a follower, that to follow or imitate or appropriate means to take one's place, and so to risk one's place, not just in ink but in the market square or the drawing room. A reading that does not tone down the lilies until they are no more than analogies is one that acts. In this way such a reading bestows upon the lilies the authority to provide nourishment: it gives the lilies their tongue.