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Actuality and Possibility, the Ethical and the Religious: An Essay on Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship

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In his 1981 monograph *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre prompted a flurry of debate within Kierkegaard studies by suggesting that the ethical stage was characterized by its “narrative unity”. Yet Kierkegaard’s ethical pseudonym in *Enten-Eller* (Either/or), Assessor Wilhelm, professes what would appear to be the poetics of Plato’s Republic, in which ethical life resists poetic representation in its temporal extension. If the assessor subscribes to these poetics, can he still be a proponent of narrative unity? In other words, if the ethical cannot be represented as poetry, are the “enacted dramatic narratives” that (for MacIntyre) are said to compose our lives but hopeful fictions? Ironically, the assessor himself attempts to render marriage (the keystone of the ethical) poetically, i.e., as possibility, for the benefit of his young friend, the aesthete A. As per his own Platonic poetics, Wilhelm must inevitably fail to grasp the essence of wedlock, but that does not mean that the ethical cannot be outlined in a straightforward historical narrative, i.e., as a representation of actuality. (Here I am building off of the famous distinction between the respective modalities of poetry and history in Aristotle’s *Poetics*). Conversely, in *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and trembling) and *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (Stages on life’s way), Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms do not approach the religious existences of Abraham and David as historical actuality because the religious, in its sublimity, will always outstrip such representations. Since the categories of trial and repentance can only be investigated as psychological possibilities (rather than historical actuality), it is left to the poet to depict these religious experiences.