I have been arguing that Kierkegaard’s paradox is best understood in terms of a dynamic ethics of immanence, one that refuses the mediation of the transcendent offered by analogy and its sublimation of suffering into theodicy. Allied to this is an insistence that the paradox only exists as figured, expressed or articulated in existence. There is no transcendent original seeking to enter the world from the outside, but only the excessive power of the unconditioned deforming and remaking the world from within.

For Kierkegaard, there is no doubt that the absolute paradox is the God-Man of Christianity. However, I have offered a reading of that affirmation in immanent terms, and consequently cast doubt on whether such an exclusive identification does justice to the nature of the paradox as Kierkegaard himself presents it. There are immanent reasons why the concept of the God-Man matters so much: ever-present yet domesticated within Christendom, it has the potential to be reexpressed, to intensify existence in antagonism to the established order and in solidarity with the suffering witness. This subversive refiguring of Christianity remains an important task for us today, given the dominance that Christian forms have assumed in the world through the political and economic colonialism of the West.

However, it is not the only task, and a focus on it to the exclusion of all else reinforces the assumption that Christianity and Christ alone are the answer to our problems. This falls back upon a renewed transcendence, a new metanarrative guaranteeing that Christianity, when appropriately purified, is the only true path of redemption. If we wish to affirm paradoxical immanence against the police function of transcendence, if we
wish to begin theology from suffering without justifying the agony of the flesh, if we want to affirm the openness of time against a fixed teleology, then another strategy is called for.

To that end, this chapter takes a dual approach. Constructively, I will identify instances in the authorship where the paradox is figured in ways that refuse containment within a Christian teleology. Negatively, I will critique the persistence of certain forms of transcendence within Kierkegaard’s texts, notably those that are allied to hierarchical and teleological ordering. I will end by suggesting that, if we are to be true to the monstrous militancy of paradoxical faith, we should explore its links with the demonic more closely. Figuration is central to these concerns because it inhabits the gap between the ideal and the real. The figure is a body of becoming, the dissonant mediation of the real and ideal in a sign of contradiction.

Ruining the Figure

Kierkegaard’s indirect communication has obviously given rise to widely divergent readings. Figuration is not self-interpreting. By way of bringing the issues into clearer focus, it will be helpful to explore work that demonstrates this ambiguity. The texts I have chosen are by Carl Hughes and Geoffrey Hale, not because they are the only ones that could have been discussed, but because they are both skilful works of scholarship that nevertheless point in quite different directions.

Hughes offers a nuanced reading of Kierkegaard’s authorship, in which a key role is given to the imagery of the theatre. As he puts it: “even Kierkegaard’s most explicitly religious writings employ the techniques of the theater in order to produce what Kierkegaard sees as theater’s signature effect: the elicitation of desire.” ¹ We are invited into the drama of the texts, in ways that have the potential to educate out longings. Hughes is attentive to the ways in which the form of the texts shapes both their reader and the nature of the truth they communicate: “[R]ather than seeking to express static doctrinal truths, Kierkegaard’s writings solicit an ever more passionate relationship to the God whom they insist they can never adequately describe.”² Significantly, this is achieved, not through the perfection of a form harmonious with its content, but indirectly, through the failure of form. This is applied to the narrative of the king and the maiden in Fragments:

Climacus can identify the failures of his fairy tale, but he still cannot depict divine love directly—not in another fairy tale, not in the most eloquent