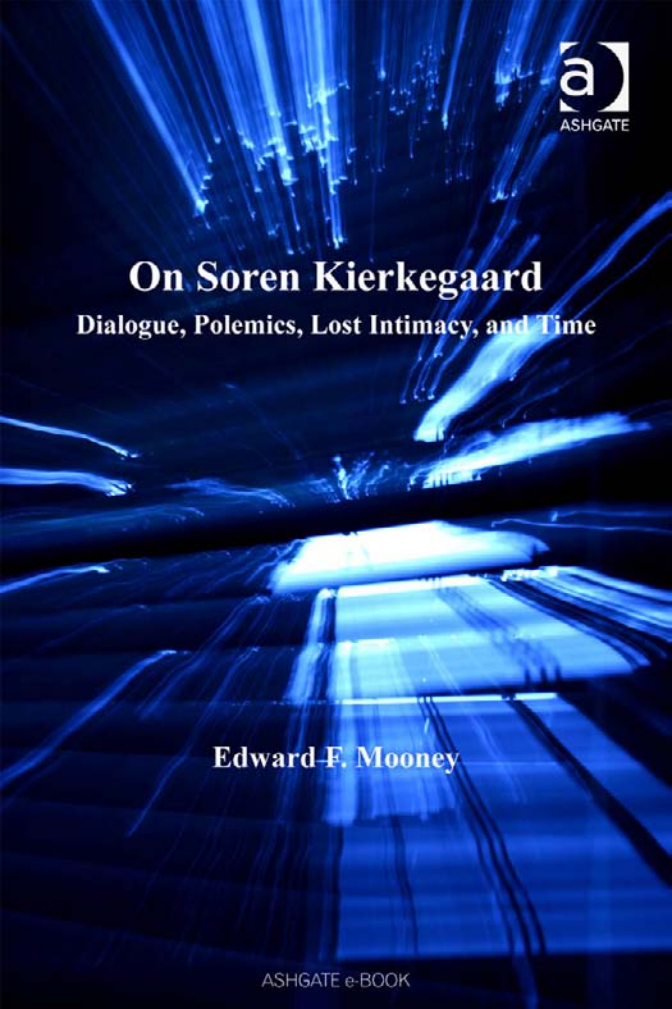
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Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time
Edward F. Mooney
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On Søren Kierkegaard

Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time

EDWARD F. MOONEY
Departments of Religion and Philosophy,
Syracuse University, USA

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For Marcia,
Kathy,
Kailen,
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Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Preface xi

Part One Kierkegaard: A Socrates in Christendom

1 A New Socrates: The Gadfly in Copenhagen 3
2 A Religious and Interrogating Socrates: Seduction and Definition 21
3 Kierkegaard's Double Vocation: Socrates Becomes Christian 37
4 Transforming Subjectivities: Lost Intimacy, Words on the Fly 61

Part Two Love, Ethics, and Tremors in Time

5 Love, This Lenient Interpreter: Masks Reveal Complexity of Self 89
6 Anxious Glances: A Seaward Look Renews Time and Seeker 107
7 *Either/Or*: Perils in Polarity: Crossing the Aesthetic-Ethical Divide 117
8 *Fear and Trembling*: Spectacular Diversions 137
9 *Repetition*: Gifts in World-Renewal: Repetition is Requited Time 157

Part Three Plenitude, Prayer, and an Ethical Sublime

10 *Postscript* and Other Ethics: Intimations of Our Next Self 177
11 *Postscript*: Possibilities Imparted: The Artistry of Intimate Connections 201
12 *Postscript*: Humor Takes it Back: Revocation Opens for Requited Time 217
13 *Discourses*: Plenitude and Prayer: Words Instill Silence – To What End? 227

Bibliography 245
Index 255

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Chapter Nine, a version of "Repetition," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds, *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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Preface

Kierkegaard is as demanding a writer and thinker as Plato or Socrates: ever provocative, ever unsettling, original, in love with argument but also with imagination, and madly elusive. The dozen-plus chapters I've assembled here are a record of wrestling with his central themes – passion, irony, subjectivity, ethics, prayer, repetition, *Augenblick* (*Øieblikket*), poetry, self-articulation, words, responsibility, the restless heart, requited and unrequited time, love. Simultaneously, they're a record of grappling with how it is that when we find evocative exemplifications of thought and value in the lives of particular persons of great worth, these exemplifications of worth, these worthy exemplars, so often appear to be responding to a call to be who they will be. And how is it that these powerful exemplars can call a reader, call Kierkegaard, call *us*, to a next and better self? My initial chapters circle around Socrates, Kierkegaard's exemplar first to last, a figure who embodies and testifies to a way of becoming at once poetic, ethical, and religious, a way that Kierkegaard found inescapable in its call.

All told, my efforts with these Kierkegaard texts work a space where theology and philosophy, literature and ethics, poetry and scripture, artistry and sacrament can mingle, affording mutual attractions and inter-animations. They need not be always already exclusive one to the other in friction or mutual suspicion. I hope that this fruitful commingling points to new possibilities for philosophy and theology.

I hope to give a sense of the sweep and tenor of Kierkegaard's accomplishment and bearing, sidestepping the challenge of an exhaustive (and exhausting) tour through all his works or through all his master themes. Of course, there are many Kierkegaards one might find lurking in his vast production, and there are approaches more rigorous and those more easygoing. At last a writer responding to the marvel of his words finds a way that beckons – and lets the chips fall. I try to free the spirit of Kierkegaard, to bring out a Kierkegaard who draws us well beyond simple philosophical, or theological, or ethical theory to a first-hand, existential reflective dialogue and polemic with the enigmas of our individual existences – even as he lays out his own intimate ventures, sufferings, and struggles with things dark and strange, not least, himself.

Kierkegaard wrote a book called *Prefaces*, and was fond of them, though they can indefinitely delay. I hear his work as an invitation to exploration, nothing more, nothing less.

Ed Mooney
Syracuse, NY
January 1, 2007

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PART ONE
Kierkegaard: A Socrates in Christendom

It's not uncommon that one hears people say . . .
that a light shines over the Christian world,
while darkness broods over paganism.

[Yet] every single deep thinker . . .
becomes young again through the eternal youth of the Greeks.

– Fear and Trembling

the deep truth in Socratic ignorance–
truly to forsake . . . all prying knowledge.

– Papers, 1846

The only analogy I have
for what I am doing
is Socrates.

– The Moment, 1854

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CHAPTER ONE

A New Socrates: The Gadfly in Copenhagen

The other day I told you about an idea for a Faust,
now I feel it was myself I was describing.
– Papers, 1836-7

by bringing poetized personalities
who say I into the centre . . . ,
contemporaries once more [can] hear an I,
a personal I, speak.
– Papers, 1847

Sketching Life

Gathering Possibilities

In the late 1830s, early in his writing career, Kierkegaard experiments with sketches of Faust in search of knowledge. He makes sketches of other fable-like figures, sketches of the Wandering Jew in search of home, of the prankster Til Eulenspiegel in search of laughs, the Master Thief in love with surreptitious gain – or perhaps in love with lawlessness itself, and of Don Juan in search of woman.[1] These sketches might have been partial self-portraits, or explorations of trajectories his life might assume. They were also experiments in writing, but writing, for Kierkegaard, was always a way of questioning and consolidating what he felt to be the enigma of his existence.

1 Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, *A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Eulenspiegel, 35, I, A 51; Faust, 35, I, A 72; 35, I, A 104; 35, I, C 58; 36-7, I, A 333; 37, II, A 29; 37, II, A 56; Wandering Jew, 35, I, C 58; 37, II, A 56; Master Thief: 34, I, A 12; Don Juan 35, I, C 58. Because of its accessibility and the felicity of its translations, whenever possible I cite *Nachlass* passages from Hannay's selection (henceforth Hannay, *Papers*). Alternatively, one can consult *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, I-XI, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting (1 ed., Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-70). On Kierkegaard's attraction to these "mythic" figures, see also Hannay's account, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 58-63. Epigraph from previous page "Forsaking Prying Knowledge," Hannay, *Papers*, 46, VII, 1, A 186. Epigraphs from this page, Hannay, *Papers*, 36-7, 1, A 333; 47, VIII, 2, B 88.

Later we get sketches of Socrates, as if Kierkegaard were experimenting with the idea of taking on a Socratic mantle. This would be a Socrates who might even carry over traits from Faust, the Wandering Jew, Eulenspiegel, Don Juan, or the Master Thief. We'd sense a Socrates in relentless search for knowledge, yet failing, and passing off his futile seeking as a virtue (a kind of Faust); a Socrates who could seem rootless and alien to those who took his piety to be impious (a Wandering Jew);[2] a Socrates who could be a subtle trickster who could launch a line of inquiry about your life that seemed both pertinent and impertinent and, by his logical slight of hand, drive you to exasperation (an Eulenspiegel). We'd sense a Socrates on the verge of seducing his interlocutors (Don Juan), perhaps into lawlessness, while claiming a humble ignorance (a Master Thief). This would also be a Socrates willing to die for a vocation that we can't help but admire (a saint, or as some early Church Fathers thought, a prototype or avatar of Christ).[3]

As Kierkegaard's career opens out in the 1840s, we have the sketches on which his lasting reputation as a writer will come to rest. They are less fable-like, yet they still lay out ways of life that we or he might aspire to attain – or ways of life that are cautionary tales: lives to avoid, that drift aimlessly, hopelessly, or that have a demonic drive. These narrative sketches – like fairy tales, operas, comedies, or scripture – show possibilities of a range of emotion or passion, a range of various attunement, attitude, or mood, a range of strength or weakness of character.

In *Either/Or*, his first great work after his dissertation, Kierkegaard composes voices from a decidedly amoral, aesthetic way of life. We have the voyeuristic stalker of "The Seducer's Diary," and then the infamous Don Giovanni, the seducer in Mozart's opera. *Either/Or* is a massive compendium of texts, and presents the expected answer to a seducer's life in the staid ethical voice of an apparently happily married and well-employed Judge Wilhelm. From the title, *Either/Or*, we know these sketches of contrasting ways of life present life-possibilities that readers should take to heart. They are literary experiments, but not only that. They bear down on us existentially.

The gallery of wonderful, strange, and frightening portraits continues to expand through Kierkegaard's prodigious authorship. In *Fear and Trembling*, we find the Biblical Abraham treated, in part, as a template through which fables of a religious

---

2 Marcia C. Robinson traces Kierkegaard's early immersion in the storytelling and literary criticism of Tieck. From the start, she argues, Kierkegaard saw that storytelling at its best was an aesthetic activity inescapably linked to religious and ethical orientations. The religious, ethical and aesthetical were *fused* in the best of writing (and, presumably, in the best of living). The aesthetic is degenerate only when cut off from the religious and the ethical. See "Tieck: Kierkegaard's 'Guadalquivir' of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation," *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 5, ed. Jon Stewart, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. Kierkegaard's late reflection that he is like the Wandering Jew is noted by Paul Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Task," Ph.D Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006, p. 304. See also George Pattison's masterful discussion of the Wandering Jew in *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chapter 4.

3 See Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 3.

or irreligious life could be projected. Still further on, in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard creates a stock figure for ridicule, the enthusiastic assistant professor, floating in abstractions. In *Stages on Life's Way*, we discover an array of characters gathered in a discussion modeled, in part, on Plato's *Symposium*, where speakers talk of love, and toward the end, perhaps enact it.

We're given an ever-expanding portfolio of sketches of a soul, or of a creature's flailing search for soul, or of creatures defiantly rejecting the soul they might become. We have, in fact, an array of portfolios, for Kierkegaard distributes his work among various intermediaries, pseudonyms, or mock-authors, with names like Johannes de silentio, Victor Eremita, Johannes Climacus, and half a dozen others.[4] This ever-expanding circus of contrasting voices speak and bespeak an array of life-possibilities that does nothing to foreclose the dizzying possibility of a never-to-be-ended search. Kierkegaard is not a writer to give us a flat, finished sketch of the most desirable or worthy life – and leave it at that.

Many of Kierkegaard's sketches are strangely self-questioning. The famous *Concluding Unscientific* (or *Unscholarly) Postscript* looks like a scholarly tome designed to mock scholarly tomes. John of silence, the putative author of *Fear and Trembling*, is anything but silent. Johannes Climacus, John the Climber (or John Ladder), the designated author of *Postscript*, seems to ascend towards ever-improved views of religiousness or piety, but he also seems to climb down into giddy irony and humor.[5] Can *that* be part of piety? Quick wit and humor is hardly the mood or attunement that Anti-Climacus inhabits in *Sickness Unto Death*, concerned as it is with modes of despair. And that landmark double book, *Either/Or*, may not in fact present a crucial choice between an "either" and an "or," but instead present a subtle neither-nor.

These endless instabilities provoke and puzzle us. Which is fundamental, humor or despair? Who is fundamental, Socrates or Christ? Are Kierkegaard's works excessively intellectual or essentially anti-intellectual? Are we to admire or condemn Abraham? Is Climacus earnest or ironical? If we probe these instabilities, they can quickly become dizzying, prompting us to grasp for a steadying interpretative equilibrium, or perhaps prompting us to forego stability, to venture living without it, yet not thereby succumbing to despair. We can find ourselves shifting from the question of restoring interpretative stability in our understanding of how these issues play out for Kierkegaard – toward a focus on stability or disruption as *we try* to *live these issues out*, find them play out, in our own experience.

The enigmas of the authorship seem unmasterable, and not because Kierkegaard lacks the talent to bring his writing to a rounded and satisfying closure. The endlessly coiling enigmas reproduce a deep fact of human existence, its lack of rounded closure. Kierkegaard engages us in an irresistibly fascinating rehearsal of the coiling instabilities in figures like Faust or Abraham or the seducer in *Either/Or.* These

4 Others include Hilarius Bookbinder, H. H., Anti-Climacus, "A," Judge Wilhelm, Inter et Inter, Vergilius Haufniensus, Nicholas Notebene, Constantine Constantius and a proposed author for *Fear and Trembling*, Simon Stylites, Solo Dancer and Private Individual.

5 See John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.

figures shadow fascinating allures and instabilities in Kierkegaard's life as well, as we glimpse segments of it in his *Journals and Papers*. And these fascinations in turn activate a shadow of ourselves.

As we live out in our own imagination the allures and instabilities that Kierkegaard exhibits, we become responsive to those trajectories of becoming that are intimately our own. This triggers a deviation – really, an uncanny complication – in our course. As we allow Kierkegaard to engage us existentially, scholarly Kierkegaard-interpretation becomes interlaced with the intimacies of self-examination. By design, it seems, Kierkegaard begins to recede as an objective problem for scholarly inquiry or accurate exposition. I came to his text to learn "about Kierkegaard," about what *he* knew – only to hear him ask, almost impertinently, what *I* know (if anything) about *my* life. I enter the unnerving shift from reading him to *being read*. I'm no longer preparing an exposition that can tutor the uninitiated in the puzzles he presents. I'm his *patient*, as it were, listening for counsel, immersed in the puzzle of *my* existence (and resistance). I'm prepared to be *mentored* by the mysteries and powers of the text.

To let Kierkegaard deal with us is like letting Socrates draw out something unexpected from our lives, helping us to be who we are and who we could become. Socrates is not a well-schooled expert in some technical field whose "knowledge" could be transcribed in a manual. He has no knowledge of that sort to convey, and so calls himself "ignorant." His wisdom is that he knows that he knows nothing of the sort. He's a midwife, bringing whomever he encounters to birth, or toward a birth. He's a guide through the pain and joy and danger of intimate transformation, someone there to help. Kierkegaard describes his *own* task as Socratic, taking away platitudes or slogans in the course of giving readers, one by one, an independence, bringing to birth the singularities they are. He mentors and reads us – in the interest of *setting free*.

As someone who will recount the landscape and particular features of Kierkegaard's writing, I must be a kind of tutor, untangling the ins and outs of the texts. That's a scholarly task. But I also have to evoke the way that Kierkegaard mentors *me* – or *you.* That's an unscholarly, unscientific task, and not at all a postscript to his ventures (or to mine). Looking at texts becomes musing on the self or soul not only of Socrates, say, or of a citizen he accosts, or of Kierkegaard, or of a soul he lays bare in writing. It becomes musing on the self or soul of an intimate acquaintance. I muse the labyrinths of my soul. He lures me into *his* world – to let me see how it's *mine*, as well. And like the best of mentors, he then steps aside to send me on my way.

Encountering the Soul

Despite the great variety of his texts and their destabilizing enigmas, Kierkegaard pursues a disarmingly simple question. It's the ancient Greek question: "*What makes for a good life*, or at least a better life, life as it was meant to be (if it yet can mean at all)?"

We seek a satisfying life responsive to what we are, including especially our needs and aspirations and what might answer them. Following Plato, we might think

of virtues or excellences that, when incorporated in our lives, would make them more worthy: honor or courage, moderation or justice might be such strengths. Or from a more recent cultural base, we might think of solidarity or creative initiative, of service or hard work or honesty. A Christian might reserve a place for hope or charity or worship, and a Buddhist might seek a release from willfulness that saves a place for flowering compassion.

Searching for virtues to consolidate a better life would be one way to respond to the question Kierkegaard presents, but consolidation might require something else, perhaps a mood, tonality or attitude. We might seek a serenity, a life of less uncertainty, one with greater promise to keep despair or emptiness at bay; or seek a subtle openness to our inescapable and grounding dependencies on others.[6] Yet again, it might seem that we should seek not exactly virtue, or an apt attuning mood, but the right modulation, quality, or intensity of our passions. We'd seek to feel things more deeply, or to damp down excitements, or to align passions with a community or landscape or with new ways of life alien to parents, strange to the friends of our youth. Of course, moods, virtues, and passions are not entirely separate consolidators of a life. They're interlocked in those ways of life we can admire and make our own.

The search for a confluence of virtues, passions, and attunements might just be the best picture we can ever get of the soul or self, what we might call the animating center of a life. The human task would be to seek such soul or self, to trace unfolding moods, passions and excellences that we especially care about as an unfolding story that might be ours, and to live out the emerging narratives and paths that they delineate.

Kierkegaard's journeys through ways of life are his search for self, for the vital core of the moods, virtues, and passions that give life. This makes his writing a spiritual discipline in the tradition Martha Nussbaum calls the Stoic "therapy of desire" and what Kierkegaard might call a therapy of passions.[7] Love of wisdom becomes *askesis*, a purifying moral exercise. In Rick Furtak's phrase, it's a "quest for emotional integrity."[8] These Kierkegaardian-Socratic exercises trace paths he can take to heart (as well as other paths that he will disown). As he puts it in a very early note, he searches " . . . for an idea for which I can live and die."[9] And he invites others to the venture, for this therapy is not done alone. Writing needs a fair share of readers *for* whom one writes, and a fair share of writers *from* whom one learns. What seems a solitary moral discipline is in fact deeply social, deeply dialogical. Spiritual exercises presuppose others within earshot, including imaginary others. Kierkegaard brings those within the city into conversation. But he also brings in Socrates, Faust,

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6 See Robert Pippin's account of ethics as a subtle openness to dependence in *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, and my response, "What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One's Own," *Inquiry*, 45(3), 2002, pp. 331-50.

7 See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

8 See Rick Anthony Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. See also Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

9 "The Gilleleje Testament," Hannay, *Papers*, Gilleleie, August 1, 1835, 35, I, A 75.

Quixote, and the many future readers he anticipates, not exempting *us*. We're drawn into intimate communion along an extended conversational excursion.

Overviews and Contact

There are countless telling moments of contact in reading Kierkegaard that deserve fine-grained attention. Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or* confronts the aesthete (referred to only as "A" – as in "anonymous," or perhaps "nameless"). A heartsick young man in *Repetition* exchanges letters with a dubious friend, and most famously, in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham journeys fatefully with Isaac to Moriah. I join such Kierkegaardian moments, starting in Chapter Six. There we begin with a woman's seacoast longing glance, a glance of unrequited love. In subsequent chapters we continue a traverse through such moments of insight, excitement, and despair, through *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Postscript*, and other texts, ending in a quiet, still moment, the silence of prayer, from his *Discourses*. These moments shine against a background, a setting. The broad setting or ambiance of Kierkegaard's conspectus is the vista of my attention in this Socratic Part One.

There's no better way to give this vista than to make it Socratic, letting Kierkegaard's life and work resound as a Socratic venture, weaving strands from the Athenian's dramatic life back and forth through strands of Kierkegaard's accomplishment. Kierkegaard himself confided that Socrates framed his life. From his deathbed, looking back on all that lay behind, he writes, "The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates. My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian."[10]

Socrates gives us the opening we need to glimpse the maze of Kierkegaard's texts without, as it were, being utterly abandoned within his labyrinth. Casting Kierkegaard as the Socrates he took himself to be sheds unexpected light. Yet Socrates is himself a kind of maze, his portrait shifting through Plato's accounts, and Kierkegaard will cast him differently in different texts. Still, if we need an overview – and we *do* – there's no better guide. An overview means hovering at some height, dropping down to pick out passages here and there and then lifting up again. It's needed because no single text or passage gives us the broad horizon needed to appreciate Kierkegaard's ground-bass motifs: philosophy as care for the soul; care as an intellectual and a religious exercise; Socrates as an exemplar; the marriage of Socratic and Christian trajectories and loyalties.

Kierkegaard picks up the Socratic counsel to live the examined life, yet he also praises yielding to other passions that are central to a worthy life. There are several phases of a self's becoming, each embedding different passions. We *examine* a self for one thing, but we also *seek* a self, which involves a different passion. We *yield* to exemplars and to apt passions or energies as they bud, which is something different yet again. And we *bring out* or *articulate* a promising path of life and aspects of a self, perhaps in silence, perhaps in action that's quite eloquent. Examining, seeking,

10 See Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 341. The remark was penned in 1854.

yielding, and articulating are not equivalent projects, though they work together. There can be deep tensions and disharmonies inherent in this passionate becoming, issuing in degrees of existential crisis. The coiling enigmas of the Kierkegaardian texts play out these phases of the self or soul in its becoming. Even though pursuing these enigmas intimates an endless task, it also foretells a brute fact – human existence lacks rounded closure.

A Labyrinth in Flux

Finding the self is less like finding a shiny key for the moment lost in shadow than like making one's way through a maze, finding orientation in it as we move through. But if we're in motion, how can we hope to hold in focus these shifting glimpses of reconfiguring passion, mood, and strength that might provide us orientation? How do we "examine" something drenched in shadows that won't hold still? At the end of the day, will Kierkegaard give us a steady portrait, or will this venture be, as we've intimated, an endless affair?

No map of the soul's unfolding will be complete, and not because time runs out (though it will). We contend with the slippage of time, with unrequited time, continually losing who we are. Love is love, but it's also, strange to say, love lost. No amount of sprinting or slowing down lets us recover that loss. As various moods, passions, or excellences strike us as pertinent, a mapping begins. We try to capture their drift, but discover soon enough that we're moving targets to ourselves. Like an ever-changing riverbed, the self's terrain is constantly under reconstruction, its former shape lost in the past as new shapes supervene. Self or soul shifts as it undergoes life's flows and rapids and countervailing eddies – and occasionally, it settles in quiet pools.

There are unfolding spans of *reflective sketching* of the self underway, of what's lost (just behind); of what's strikingly with us (just now), and of what's anticipated (just ahead). There are unfolding spans of *strategic reflection* on how to negotiate what's ahead in light of what's behind, and spans of *active response*, which include *willingness* or *yielding* as well as resolute *decision*. These phases of unfolding emerge interactively and in flux. So the task of catching, or being, or becoming a self is a triple knot: catching a relatively unpredictable target on the move – catching it *even as* the *movement-of-catching-it* alters the target's motion – and catching it *even as we give subtle or dramatic impetus* to its flow in moments of judgment, negotiation, and action that may be directed to things other than the self that was the moving target in our moving sights.

By her unfolding pen-strokes an artist "avows," as it were, that her model's countenance is like *this*, even as her sketching can intimate to her something of who *she* (not her model) *is in the world.* She's a person strangely attracted to a certain curl of the lip; and then she's someone perplexed about what that unsought attraction might *mean.* Her self-awareness wanders toward adjacent attractions or perplexities

as she monitors the mobile countenance of her own existence dancing in tandem with the apparently more steady countenance of her sitting model.[11]

That's what it's like to read Kierkegaard. By a sympathetic vibration, as it were, his watch on himself-watching-another can set off our own self-watching. We find ourselves searching-ourselves even as we monitor his search-of-himself through his sketch of a Judge or an Abraham. Of course self-examination is worthy as it completes itself in action or inaction that will round out the affirmations, negations, and judgments that precede it. So it is with Kierkegaard. And he'll bring in the gift of our capacity to halt endless self-reflection or self-watching (which otherwise becomes paralyzing, endlessly regressive: watching a watching that's watching . . .). He'll bring in and honor decision as a phase of becoming that's as worthy as reflection.

This continuous flow of self illustrates unrequited and requited time. Temporality is in part the affliction of *unrequited time*, a suffering of time slipping by. In *Fear and Trembling* and the *Concept of Anxiety*, unrequited lovers seek their beloved in time now lost. Yet as important as the recognition of time lost, slipping by, is the recognition of time renewed, time regained. As present moments fade, new ones befall us, holding unexpected joys (and yes, perhaps new afflictions). When *goods* befall us, time is *requited.* Isaac is lost and then wondrously returned. A hope for time's requital is what Kierkegaard calls a hope for repetition, for goods unreachable by effort but received willingly as gift.

For lovers, each moment is a wondrous and unexpected gift, but we are not always lovers, and so we suffer lost love. Quests for self resemble quests for love, each a stint with unrequited time. Not to despair of love's requital means not to lose hope for "repetition," a "movement" that returns love, self, and lost time. As responsible, temporal beings, we take up the tasks of being true to what we are and can be, and suffer the vulnerability of knowing that our efforts may or may not be requited. Obtruding futures disrupt attempts to know or preserve a flux-of-self. Yet despite despair of lasting closure here, the search continues, for living can't be forever sidestepped or postponed.

Transformative Exercises

We assemble pictures of the soul – of Socrates, a seducer, or a city Judge – not just to spread out in a gallery to contemplate. We want to sort better life-possibilities from lesser ones in order better to *live out* the better (and avoid the worse). We work to take a possibility to heart, to let the living spirit of the better there in the sketches thrive as it becomes our own.[12] What are we to *make* of Faust or Socrates, the Master

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11 See Robert Pippin, "On 'Becoming Who One Is' (and Failing): Proust's Problematic Selves," in Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *Philosophical Romanticism*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 113-40. Consider also Wilde's classic *Portrait of Dorian Gray*.

12 "Appropriation" has unfortunately become a term of art in reading Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and others. As I hear it, the basic idea is *to take up with* an idea or theme in an invested way, to take it to heart. The root meaning of "appropriation" in English still carries overtones of theft or seizure – appropriating property not one's own. You might "take up with"

Thief or voyeuristic Seducer, of the complacent Judge or an enigmatic Abraham? Then there's Anti-Climacus, that dialectician of despair, or Johannes Climacus, that mocker of professors and purveyor of high humor. Pursuing these is not just amusing recreation, or a brain-teasing challenge. These figures and their adjunct life-path scripts raise existential questions, challenges that test who and what I am. So I'm inevitably implicated as I work within and among the varieties of soul that Kierkegaard lays out.[13]

If *writing* is a spiritual (or even sacramental) exercise for Kierkegaard, *reading* is one too. In exchange that's sacramental, we call on and receive the sacred in a context of earnest spiritual-moral practice, ritual, or routine. Kierkegaard composed his works to be read aloud, and he often writes as a reader of his *own* work, reviewing it as a third party might. If I read his work, not to give an exposition of it but as a spiritual exercise, it will reveal me to myself. As I read its worlds, so it reads me, I *hear* myself in it. *My* soul-seeking runs in tandem with *his*.

In reading to be read, I am in part (and quite obscurely) *what* I search for – what I *love* or take to heart. I'm also, in part, a set of already engaged (and obscurely bequeathed) *resources:* for *initiating* self-seeking, for *recognizing clues* of progress (or defeat), for *taking to heart* the soul I glimpse as mine, and for *taking the next step*, "living forward," as Kierkegaard will say. There's plenty of room, then, for mystery, puzzlement, and acceptance of grace in this light-and-shadowed wilderness we call the self.

To "know" myself intimately, existentially, seems as impossible as catching myself in motion, and *catching the me that does the catching*, as impossible as stepping in the same river twice. Kierkegaard is Socrates, but also Heraclitus, the obscure philosopher, the poet of flux and strife and instability, the writer of fragments, the sage who warned, "You would not find the boundaries of the soul, even if you should travel along every path, so deep is it's account."[14]

("appropriate") a subjective truth. But then again, so it seems to me, a subjective truth might *take up with you.* For Kierkegaard, being "appropriated" *by* the truth (or by a truth) is the other side of taking up with it.

13 In Chapter Seven, I discuss how *Either/Or* implicates a reader, reflecting back to the reader the stance the reader takes to the text, and thus opening toward a moral judgment of the reader. If I'm too hastily indifferent to parts of a Kierkegaard text, that fact can serve to show me, at second glance and as the dismissed text does work behind my back, that I'm hastily indifferent not only to it but to parts of my life that deserve more attention as well – more *moral* attention, that is. The text thus reads the moral contours of my life and judges it accordingly. Clark West has reminded me that this is just the way Nathan's parable to David serves to judge David, who is the reader (or hearer) of that text. See Chapter Three, note 4.

14 Heraclitus, Fragment #45, (Diel's numbering), quoted in Nussbaum's essay, "Aristotle on Human Nature," in Ross Harrison and J.E.J. Altham, eds, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 86.

Falling for Socrates

Skeptical Unknowing

Kierkegaard, like Plato, gives us the verbal wit and living presence of Socrates, reanimating that gadfly of Athens, whom he restages amidst the flux of meanings-given and meanings-lost in and around a modern life. Even as he writes, Kierkegaard steps aside to let another respond, which makes his writing deeply dialogical, like Plato's. His address singles out a person whom he greets as "my reader." We're not allowed to turn anonymous, be "just anyone in general." Whoever reads him from heart and mind wins his intimate address.

Socrates maintains a steady *skeptical reserve*, for a good teacher won't impede a student's budding sense of self by an excessive intrusion of his or her own opinions or views.[15] Silence or reserve lets freedom of another grow. There's a pedagogical wisdom in stepping aside to let a student blossom on her own. Of course, this skeptical reserve is wise for another, substantive reason. Epistemically and practically we sail uncharted seas into the unknown, especially as we pursue our deepest passions. Final ignorance here is inescapable.[16] Furthermore, wisdom is linked to silence and reserve because as we absorb the utter *importance* of a theme for (and of) our life, we're at a loss how to convey to others exactly how and why it lies so *heavily* with us. The common stock of platitudes or clichés or wooden dogmas just won't do. But what words *do* we have – beyond phrases learned by rote? There's wisdom in frankly witnessing to the condition of *being at a loss for words*, especially as words fail to sound the depth of our concern. This witness is in welcome contrast to the chatter of the city. Kierkegaard applauds.

Yet are Socrates or Kierkegaard really in the dark about knowledge? If knowledge is a virtue, and Socrates is a paragon of virtue, he must possess knowledge – so it seems. And frequently he tells us what he knows – for instance, what he knows about love, or about gratitude toward the city that nurtured him like a parent. So his ignorance isn't thoroughgoing. Perhaps he feigns ignorance to draw his interlocutor into dialogue, not letting on that he's holding the answers up his sleeve. Yet there's another way to hear this profession. His knowledge – and virtue – is not that he knows absolutely nothing, but that he knows how *little* he knows, overall, in a city that thinks it knows nearly everything, a city that hardly acknowledges its ignorance at all. The virtuous life is traversing the uncharted, living with unknowing. And we'll see that traversing the uncharted in matters of our deepest need characterizes

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15 Ancient skepticism introduced doubt in the interest of leading a better life – not as an academic puzzle.

16 Climacus characterizes passion as a river of which we know neither the source nor the mouth: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, Vol.1, p. 237 (hereafter, *CUP*). I discuss passion as a deeper basis for understanding persons than language, belief, and action, in "Becoming What We Pray: Passion's Gentler Resolutions," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. Kierkegaard writes, "What unites all human beings is passion. So religious passion, faith, hope and love, are everything." Hannay, *Papers*, 42-3, IV, C 96.

not only a virtuous, philosophical way of life, but also a religious one. Being candid about living without answers is the opposite of holding answers up one's sleeve (as a trickster Socrates or Kierkegaard might).

Failing Method

Most textbook introductions depict Socrates as the inventor of the sort of cross-examination we find in contemporary courtrooms. This stubborn method of rational confrontation cost Socrates his life. He might or might not have been martyred for his religious convictions, but assuredly he was charged and put to death for his relentless, pesky, irreverent *questioning*.

The novelty and threat of his questions, their intolerable bite, were traumatic for Athenians. Interrogation was supposed to serve a moral purpose. At first glance, that purpose seems to be to uncover essential definitions, of friendship, say, or piety. Shouldn't that benefit Athens? It could move one or many toward a better life. An Athenian who submitted would be improved precisely by acquiring an intellectual grounding in explicit definitions. But, as we know, this demand for definition was seen by the city not as a benefit but as a threat. Socrates was dangerous and impertinent. Who was *he* to suggest that *they* needed to question the underpinnings of their lives?

Kierkegaard admires this familiar interrogating Socrates, and he also admires the Socrates who speaks lyrically for Diotima and for love in the *Symposium.* Socrates appears in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (better translated, *Crumbs*, or *Trifles*) where he's cast as an advocate of the Platonic doctrine that "knowledge is recollection," the view that rational interrogation can induce recollection of a now forgotten intellectual truth.[17] But as Kierkegaard's title suggests, the results will disappoint. They'll be intellectually meager, mere *crumbs*. Kierkegaard surely knows that the great visions of Plato's middle dialogues – *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedo* – arrive not through cross-examination but through myth, witness, or a kind of Socratic poetic revelation or exposition. The early dialogues – *Lysis*, on friendship, *Euthyphro*, on piety– tend to be *aporetic*, unresolved. They ought, accordingly, to cast doubt on our ready confidence (if we have it) in cross-examination's promise. We're left baffled, "ignorant," perhaps irritated or angry. And yet Socrates seems strangely comfortable without answers.

Initially, the attractiveness of Socratic interrogation lay in its promise to uncover moral definitions that could ground our lives securely. But that pledge now seems dashed. Of course, the method does good work in exposing false assumptions and untruths. But the hope was for something more redeeming. Perhaps there might be subtle but nonetheless quite valuable collateral effects, effects that are achieved

17 To translate the Danish *smule* or *smuler* as "Fragments" can suggest misleadingly that something whole has been shattered, and might be reassembled. "Fragments" also fails to capture the Biblical resonance of "the morsel that falls from the master's table." Paul Muench suggests "trifle," a neglected option. Taking his cue, the title's full length and lightness could then best be given as *Philosophical Crumbs, or a Trifle of Philosophy.* See Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Task," p. 240.

indirectly in the course of approaching this destination that holds no answers. Say an "essential definition" of some pivotal moral term eludes us (as is usually the case). In the process of pursuing first *this* definitional proposal, and then the *next*, we come to acquire a sense of its rough contours, and of the contextual "associative field" that it occupies.[18] Something about justice or friendship or piety will come into view *even if* we are denied a crisp and adequate definition. That's a reason to keep listening to Socrates (or Kierkegaard, for that matter) even when we're left baffled or empty-handed. And we *do* keep listening.

There's another reason to keep listening. We've become attached to Socrates because he offers his *person*, his *character*, his *vision*, even as he fails to give us definitions. He offers himself as a site that exemplifies truth, virtue, and wisdom. I'll come back to explore this second reason to keep listening. At the moment I want to take up a moral burden that both Socrates and Kierkegaard incur as they promote a method that they know will fail. The moral problem is that they seem to *cover up* a feature of interrogation. In order to get citizens to buy into their enterprise, they seem to be *deceptive* about the downsides.

Well, I've exaggerated slightly, for Socrates makes no *explicit* promises about what his method will deliver. He just starts interrogating, and since we trust *him*, we trust that his interrogations are geared to deliver definitions that will improve our moral footing. That's the supposition. If Socrates' virtue is untarnished, why else would he interrogate? But once we're seasoned in the method, we suspect that Socrates has hooked us knowing full well that the method won't deliver helpful definitions. If Socrates and Kierkegaard are well aware that critical interrogation can expose untruth but can't deliver much more, why aren't they morally culpable for their failure to disclose this limitation?

We're lured into the world of Socrates or Kierkegaard by the hope of something we can believe in, and that we *want* to believe in. We want a method that delivers virtue, so Socrates will play along – that's his *entrée* with us. But perhaps cornering a definition of virtue might not be all that Socrates is about. The Socratic or Kierkegaardian failure of full disclosure might then seem to be an essential step in getting us closer to an unattractive but deep truth: *no mere method can fulfill the promise of virtue*; *no intellectual technique can deliver it*. Because we're understandably resistant to this truth of ignorance or unknowing, we need to be *deceived* into contact with it. Experiencing the breakdown of rational interrogation might be the only way to learn its limits. But that could happen only through initial commitment to the enterprise. Do we conclude that, in the long run, this apparent deception by Socrates or Kierkegaard is not such a bad thing?

A moral scorecard might judge that Socratic interrogation is a good thing. First, it removes false confidence in our grasp of conventional knowledge. Second, it's a good thing to give rational interrogation an all-out try, in order, paradoxically, to discover its breaking point. It's good to use interrogation to remove false confidence

18 Sharon Krishek introduces the helpful notion of an "associative field" in her path-breaking discussion of Kierkegaard's concepts of love: "The Infinite Love of the Finite: Faith, Existence and Romantic Love in the Philosophy of Kierkegaard," Ph.D Dissertation, University of Essex, 2006, p. 8.

in interrogation *itself* as an all-purpose virtue-discovery machine. Interrogation can bring us to the truth that, in moral or spiritual inquiry, method takes a back seat to *the virtue of an exemplary person*. It's the person, not the method, that passes virtue on. The failure of the method might then function to enhance our ties to Socrates as exemplar. He *stays* there when we need him most. We'll return in a moment to this most important insight.

On the other side of the scorecard, the disvalue of the Socratic practice is that it gulls the untutored by promoting a false hope, or failing to expose its falsity. Socrates either downplays the fact that an intellectual search for sturdy security-conferring definitions can't be successful, or fails to disabuse us of the illusion he knows we hold, that interrogation can get beyond exposing falsehoods to give us the *constructive* truths we need for moral footing.

Yet we should not overlook an extenuating circumstance. Socrates can't explain or justify his interrogating procedures. He'll remain especially obscure about his conviction that he should interrogate a life – for good reason. And it's not because he likes to be cruelly opaque with us. Socrates transgresses anything his audience could recognize as a reasonable appeal or justification or explication of what he's doing because he is engaged in what Jonathan Lear calls an innovative cultural project.[19] It's a project that is dramatically traumatic for the city. Socrates needs to make space for *instituting* a new concept, the idea that one has a "life-as-a-whole" that needs assessment and examination. Standing back to evaluate a life is a novel and threatening gesture – a crime – in a culture whose practice would be to evaluate only an *action* or a *policy*. His questions didn't make too much sense to his audience, and his professed ignorance was, in part, an acknowledgment that he could not deliver answers to them. What language would be comprehended? And perhaps Socrates himself was not quite able to know what sort of answers he was groping for. Thus the awkward but alluring way that Socrates opens issues he can't close, starts fights he leaves unfinished, and looks for definitions he can't find. Kierkegaard likewise raises more questions than he can answer, questions that his audience can neither answer nor abide, questions that may also stagger him. He asks, for instance, how it can be that in Christendom *no one is yet a Christian*!

We've asked whether there is a culpable sleight of hand in Socrates' promotion of a method he knows will fail. I think there's no conclusive answer. We leave this slight detour to take up again the proposal that even as interrogation fails, a surprising good arrives – contact with the exemplary person.

From Technique to Person

Socrates removes the confidence of his Athenian interlocutors. "*We know what we know*," they might say, "and we needn't concern ourselves with what we *don't* – which can't be all *that* much!" That brazen confidence (or complacency) is as common in Copenhagen (or in any contemporary village or metropolis) as it is in Athens. Kierkegaard, too, goes after such willful gall. They might think, "O*f course* we know

19 See Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 101-5.

what life is about – it's *here*, *all around us*! How could we *not* know it?" And they might add, "Even if *we* are ignorant, there are *experts* of a theoretical temper whose job it is to offer a *conceptual* grasp of life's structure." We rest assured. Our eloquent cultural icons will tell us what life's about: will to *power*, the struggle to *survive*, the capacity for *politics,* or reverence for the *gods*, or *art* or the capacity to show *charity*. We debate these proposals. But Kierkegaard and, were he present, Socrates would demur. To pursue these conjectures and to put great store in our debates around them, they'd protest, is to participate in the illusion that an *answer lies just ahead*. From the point of view of Socrates or Kierkegaard, at the most fundamental level we just *don't know* (objectively, impersonally, from a scholarly standpoint) *what life's all about*. We don't have *theories* of life that meet our existential needs, nor will they be forthcoming. Interrogation exposes our ignorance, which should make us less confident that we'll soon have figured out what life's about. In its breakdown, interrogation makes way for humility, faith, and wisdom.

Socrates knows that moral footing is necessary, and that providing it is a two-phased operation. Interrogation helps to deflate moral confidence, but if it's not to undermine *all* trust in virtue, Socrates must see that listeners stay attached to him – perhaps in his role as interrogator, but perhaps also in his role defending love or in his standing with courage before the court and later before death. The brilliant flash of his questioning could keep his admirers hooked. Socrates knows his virtue is not reducible to the virtue of the method he passes on. Methods are techniques whose power can spring free from any particular practitioner. That *is* their power. But the virtue of a *person* can't be pawned off as the power of falsity-exposing skills passed on as method. Socrates' admirers will learn from his *example.*

However entertaining, witty, and skillful Socrates and Kierkegaard may be in their interrogations, they also have a melancholy, tragic side. They sense that they'll not be heard, and that just around the corner there are charges against them for disrupting the peace – or worse. We sense they might say *more*, give us more to *grasp* in our moral unsteadiness. On our particularly bad days we can fear that Socrates and Kierkegaard are only messengers of misfortune. Socrates brings the bad news that we don't really have a grasp of friendship or piety – things we *thought* we understood. Kierkegaard brings the upsetting news that we have no grasp of what commitment, faith, or ethics actually demand. And there's more bad news, for in the long run Socrates takes away a hope that security can be found in formulating crisp definitions of contested terms. Kierkegaard, for his part, takes away all hope that security can be found in doctrine or creed, in academic scholarship or theory.

If Socrates can't restore our moral footing, that's news we'd rather not have heard. The parallel bad news from Kierkegaard is that faith is never more than a hair's breadth from despair. If knowledge of definitions can't provide a secure basis for human life, if it's unavailable, metaphysically beyond the pale, the prerogative of the gods alone – then *how can Socrates be a moral exemplar*? His method removes untruth. But why do we admire him if he can't deliver replacements for what he breaks? What will give the footing that we need?

We've glimpsed the answer. We look past the *method* to the *person* wielding it. A method that fails as a truth-detector brings us incidentally to the inestimable worth of an exemplar, someone who exemplifies the value and the truth we seek. We trust the

person, *Socrates.* He instills a restorative confidence by directing our interest *away* from those shattered hopes for a method – toward *him*. *Socrates himself* becomes the basis of our moral footing, delivered as the contours of his character: his passions, virtues, attunements – his soul. He gives us that solid basis through *contact with him* – with a life we can't but follow, and can't but praise.

Security-conferring definitions are *not* available*,* but a security-instilling way of life *is* – a life wherein knowledge is entwined in the living of it, a strength or excellence *lived knowingly*. In the *Symposium* Socrates *avows* knowledge of love and in the *Apology* he *avows*, and bears *witness* to, the wrongness of disobedience and the rightness of justice.[20] This *avowed* knowledge survives despite the lack of any method there to vindicate it. We absorb that knowing through our trust in the person who avows it, on the basis of the eloquence of his *witness*. It can take hold as it dodges the ordeals of harsh interrogation. It's knowledge that eludes interrogation because interrogation puts propositions in the dock, and a person is much more and quite other than a set of propositions interrogated in the dock. Knowledge that's *witnessed to* and *exemplified*, even knowledge that's avowed, is backed by character and bearing. In the case of Socrates, it's knowledge vividly entwined in the contours of his life as it's lived and spoken out. Those close to Socrates find his life and speech a song they can't but love.

Socrates has an intimate, non-intellectual knowledge of courage, of friendship, of inquiry, of camaraderie, of drinking – a coping know-how, a knowing unexplicated but *exemplified*, knowledge that's in contact with the world, with his fellows, and with a path of virtues.[21] He convinces us, and Kierkegaard, of his existential worth not only by dialectic but by *living out that worth*. In his portraits Kierkegaard gathers living possibilities that embed vice and virtue in a *living out of them*. We see Socrates at work – sometimes interrogating, sometimes musing, sometimes holding forth, intervening in his city's affairs, then retreating outside the city's walls. We see a worthy and memorable life-toward-death, a life-despite-death, a living that seems to go unruffled straight through death, a life whose speech, action, and undergoing are far more persuasive than any enumeration of principles could be. We have an exemplar of devotion to a philosophical and religious ideal, *a beacon of living truth* (if I can put it that way). He lives beyond the assurance of objectively secured results or intellectual protocols that might vindicate his unwavering convictions. Kierkegaard *reveres* this skeptical Socrates dancing with utter existential confidence over an anxious abyss of "objective uncertainty."Climacus puts it with a memorable flourish. We have in Socrates "*a solo dancer in honor of divinity.*"[22]

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20 *Apology*, 28C, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961.

21 I return to "intimate" or "tactile" knowledge in the final sections of Chapters Three and Five.

22 *CUP*. p. 89, Paul Muench's translation.

Falling in Love

Interrogation, for an enchanted Kierkegaard, was a way to remove nonsense, damp down chatter, and decrease the culture's ambient noise. And he saw that his mentor had another side – so I believe. Beyond his exposé of untruth, Socrates modeled simple truths – that beauty was an inward radiance behind a rough exterior, that death was nothing to fear, that critique could be liberating as well as frustrating, that one should follow the path of justice. Socrates utters some memorable propositions: "The unexamined life is not worth living." But he's memorable also for a way of life delivered by Plato's evocation of *who he is.*

Socrates was irresistible. The young man in the *Theages* blushingly confides that he makes his *best* philosophical progress when he is in the same room with Socrates, when he can see him, sit beside him, and (heaven forbid) touch him.[23] As others saw his beauty, so Socrates saw *theirs*, having received, as he put it, "the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved."[24] In the *Symposium* he says, "I am ignorant of all things except the nature of love."[25] He had the sort of intimate, visceral knowledge of love that he, as one smitten, could not fail to know, and that others, if they were the least bit attentive, could not fail to notice, too. The *eros* that radiated through his rough exterior gives those responsive to it a path of discovery. Built into this love or allure we find strengths of character, steady serenity, convictions as they play out in the drama of his final days. That drama eludes reduction to any platitude that could make the social rounds as a fashionable *bon mot*, or a creedal proposition. In the great speeches of the *Apology* or *Crito* we get not platitudes but the *person*.

The *Republic* and *Symposium* stage brilliant arguments embedded in a dramatic context that features Socrates. But there's more than argument and more than the citizen, Socrates. Even when we forget their place in an argument, we remember the Myth of Er, the parable of the Cave, Diotima's speech, the Ring of Gyges. These narratives testify to Plato's imaginative powers (and to the poetic, lyrical powers he passes on to Socrates). They stand on their own like operatic arias, even as we know that they're part of a larger drama that features Socrates as the leading voice. From this angle, Socrates wears these on-stage tales as part of his alluring and puzzling verbal attire, as much a part of him as his beard. Seeing him is to hear the myth, the image, the narrative. The allure of the speech redounds to the allure of the speaker, and viceversa. Kierkegaard loved the Socrates whose biting wit could bring the mighty down. He also loved the Socrates living out a radiant *vision* of self or soul.

23 See Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 130. The authenticity of the attraction is striking, even while questions remain about the the authenticity of the dialogue that expresses it.

24 *Lysis*, 204b.

25 *Symposium*, 177d.

Taking Stock

To know any writer, especially one as complex as Kierkegaard, it helps to know his mentors. As he says on his deathbed, his task was *always* Socratic. Bringing Kierkegaard into contact with Socrates tilts Kierkegaard toward *philosophy.* This makes him much more than a colorful critic of a fashionable Hegelianism or an old-fashioned defender of the faith. Bringing Socrates into contact with Kierkegaard tilts Socrates toward *religion.* This makes him much more than a crotchety critical thinking machine. These shifts in how we take these two impressive figures create an unexpected *rapprochement*.

In popular perception, Kierkegaard is quickly identified as religious, but Socrates less so. He's been often featured – quite misleadingly – as fashioning a secular, rational critique of backward Athenian religious ways, making him a kind of proto-Enlightenment religious skeptic. After all, he *appeared* to be a dangerous skeptic to those in the city who put him on trial and sentenced him to death precisely for impiety. But this is terribly misleading for it leaves out the Oracle that sets out his vocation. It leaves out his trusted *daimon*, it leaves out his religious informant on love, Diotima, and leaves out his debt to the god Asclepius, a debt that he discharges as he dies. It neglects his approving views of immortality and his hymns in answer to the dream that appears to him just before his death. The dream tells him to "make music and compose."[26] Kierkegaard roots his love in a Socrates whose *philosophical* initiatives are inseparable from his *religious* convictions, devotions, and way of life.

The remaining three chapters of Part One continue this introduction of Kierkegaard's aims and accomplishments focused through the lens of his relation to this astonishing Athenian figure, a figure of innumerable gifts. The Socrates Kierkegaard loved is a master of rational interrogation and critique, an extraordinarily *imaginative*, *poetic-philosophic* genius, a person of great moral and political courage who is stalwart in his religious-philosophical calling. Here is a mirror in which Kierkegaard's alluringly multifaceted poetic, religious, and intellectual accomplishments can be gauged, a mirror in which his writing can now appear as a set of realizations, restagings, or repetitions of Socratic themes and life.

To open these first chapters with such a broad comparison has its risks. We move lightly over many texts and completely neglect still others. This is skating over thin ice. But if the aim is to evoke the ambiance Kierkegaard inhabits and the vista he enjoys and suffers, then that's a necessary risk. Only a climb above the fine-grained detail of the texts affords the prospect from which we see – or hear – the subtle coloring, timbre, and ringing overtones of Kierkegaard's production. Failing to climb up to take in the expanse, we lose perspective as we get too close to too many pages of too many good books. As a balance, the chapters in Parts Two and Three drop down considerably to wrestle with specific texts, and occasionally with only a brief passage within them. In the next chapter, we feature Socrates as he appears in the *Symposium*, a Socrates whose lyricism ascends and whose interrogations fall to the side.

26 *Phaedo*, 60e.

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CHAPTER TWO

A Religious and Interrogating Socrates: Seduction and Definition

My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition
of what it means to be a Christian. . . .
– The Moment, 1854

What the world needs, absorbed
as it is in so much learning,
is a new Socrates.
– Sickness Unto Death

Socratic Allure

Kierkegaard has his author Johannes de silentio subtitle *Fear and Trembling* "Dialectical Lyric." As I hear it, this gives pride of place to lyric – which can be *conducted* dialectically. In Plato's *Symposium*, when it comes to his turn to speak, Socrates begins with some dialectical forays and then delivers his lyrically enchanting tale of love that he's heard from a priestess. Piety, poetry, and philosophy are artfully combined. And if we hear an undertone of violence in Alcibiades' outburst toward the end of this otherwise quite civilized discussion, then we might find in the mix even a threat of politics (he'll be known as something of a tyrant, after all).

In the *Symposium*, Socratic wisdom and conviction appear largely unconstrained by interests in rational vindication. A largely interrogating, combative Socrates is replaced by a more lyrical, enchanting one. Of course there are some poetic, nearly lyrical moments in the *Apology* as Socrates speaks of death and underworld conversations. But in the *Symposium* the balance of lyric and dialectic noticeably shifts.[1] The cool and collected Socrates of *Euthyphro* may be preferable to the *Symposium* Socrates of love, poetry, and drink. Be that as it may, the Socrates we seek

1 Plato begins to upstage or abandon Socrates certainly by the late dialogues, and, as some believe, perhaps as early as the middle dialogues, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. But the Socrates we find in *Symposium* – the more lyrical, less interrogating Socrates – can be a different side of the Socrates of the *Apology*, not just an excessive and purely Platonic *supplement* to that earlier figure, or *rejection* of him. I take Socrates both as the interrogator of the early dialogues *and* as the lyric speculator, spinner of myth and vision, that we find in the middle dialogues.

is the Socrates that Kierkegaard embraced. He welcomed both the hard interrogator and "the solo dancer" in praise of love and the divine.[2]

Socrates arrives late, having fallen into a mysterious trance on the way to the party. He's presented as someone who escapes into a dream-world and, for significant moments, leaves everyone far behind. His closest friends seem undisturbed by this spell of vacancy, of absence, though *our* curiosity is piqued. Why does Plato insert this potentially discrediting detail? Do we want to trust the views of a person subject to such otherworldly flights? Socrates snaps out of it in time to find his friends and join them as they settle on the evening's entertainment. They land on a topic bound to please and amuse and even instruct – the theme of love.

So far there's nothing in this *mise en scène* to suggest that Socrates is a well-oiled stoic thinking machine. Quite the contrary. He confides that he "can't name a time when I was not in love." We might remember an earlier dialogue where he confessed to having "the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved."[3] Only a minor dialectical skirmish prefaces his speech, which he begins unabashedly with the revelation that his knowledge of love comes from a priestess whose credentials are never presented. He repeats her story – and calls that *knowledge*. He's not guessing here; love is something he really *knows* about. As he puts it, "*I am quite ignorant of all things except the nature of love*."[4]

Socrates leaves his critical persona to one side. Aristophanes presents a profound and hilarious story of the creation of the sexes, the splitting of original unified, spherical creatures in two as a punishment, and the attendant yearnings and sexual probings of one half-creature for its missing other half. Does Socrates *accept* this comic take on love? It would be churlish of him to even *want* to undermine this captivating story. On what basis, then, are we won over by *his* account – especially since the contrasting vision of Aristophanes is so enchanting?

We're won over, smitten, by the *tale* – but also by the *teller*, the *person* revealed in and through his telling and its staging. Take reading a story to children. Kierkegaard reminds us of the absolutely central role of the story *teller*. He gives more importance to the teller than to the tale. And quite unexpectedly he tells us that the "procedure for storytelling [is] Socratic." "The whole point," he says, "is to *bring the poetic into touch with their lives in every way*, to exercise a power of enchantment."[5] As Kierkegaard has it, Socrates has "the power of enchantment." And we learn that storytelling – not just interrogations – can be Socratic. In the *Symposium*, as well as in some of the most memorable passages in the *Republic*, the *Apology*, and other dialogues we find moments when Plato enchants us with Socrates the storyteller, the storyteller who gives us Diotima, the image of the Cave, the Myth of Er, and other

2 *CUP*, p. 89. I thank Paul Muench for this passage.

3 *Lysis*, 204b.

4 *Symposium*, 177 d; the sentiment is repeated in *Theages,* 128 b: ". . . as I am always saying, I am quite ignorant in general save for one small subject: the nature of love."

5 *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978, Vol. 1, p. 265 (henceforth, *JP*). See Marcia C. Robinson's discussion, "Tieck: Kierkegaard's 'Guadalquivir' of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation," in Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 5, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.

narrative gems. As Kierkegaard reflects on storytelling here, he gives us the Socrates who wins us through his imaginative vision and through his poetic skills in relaying that vision.

Plato gives us an enchanting theater of speakers and food and flute girls, all contrived to free up imagination. Drink and music famously work to that end, and love frees up our capacity for fantasy and attraction, too. Socrates has quite an exceptional power to attract. We remember the young man in *Theages*, who confesses that his best learning takes places when his eyes meet the gaze of Socrates, when he's in immediate *contact*. This *seductive*, *enchanting* side of Socrates is confirmed by Alcibiades, who bursts into the room, a lover scorned who now in his torment cuts a ridiculous figure.[6] His tale of infatuation, of his stumbling pursuits and painful rejections, grips our imagination as such ill-fated infatuations will. It's the story of unrequited love. Inhabiting the space of his story frees our imagination for an *intimate, enacted knowledge* of love – which is at the greatest remove from knowledge contained in propositional summation.

As the grip of practical reality is loosened through poetry and love, imagination frees up. Through Plato's contrivance, we come to question our orientation, to wonder *what's going on*. Why is the comic *Aristophanes* given such tender attention? (Or, shifting forward, why does Kierkegaard value humor and the comic?) Why does *Alcibiades* burst so violently on the scene? (And why does Kierkegaard place a violent Abraham so centrally?) As Socrates speaks, are we listening to Diotima, or to Socrates' *rendition* of Diotima? Or is Diotima just a convenient pseudonym that Socrates invents? Why does Plato say that these speeches by Socrates, Diotima, Aristophanes, and others are reports from a gentleman who wasn't there, but *heard* that *several years* past *something like* the symposium here recounted in fact occurred? (And why does this gentleman confess to *not remembering very well* what was said then?) Is this anonymous person a reliable conduit of truth?

Each question irrupts to unsettle our practical certainty, and each unsettling impact forces imagination alive. We work to "connect the dots," as best we can, paying rapt attention, awaiting clues along the way, learning how to live with uncertainty. We're freed from following a merely factual drone. Do we *need* to have wisdom anchored in credentialed testimony? What could "credentialed testimony" *mean* in this context?

Kierkegaard uses a similar "unanchoring" device in his use of pseudonyms. We're uncertain where Diotima leaves off and Socrates begins, or where Socrates leaves off and Plato begins, and likewise, we wonder where Climacus or Judge Wilhelm leave off and Kierkegaard begins. What's *unambiguous* amidst this uncertainty is that Socrates does not win us to his view of love by combative questioning. Loosening imagination and feeding our susceptibility to love, we're won over by his *lovely speech on love.*

Plato makes this literary device of "slipping anchors" duplicate and reinforce the dynamic of love and seduction that's under explicit discussion. Just as Kierkegaard retreats behind his pseudonyms, Plato lets himself retreat into the shadows by putting an irresistible *Socrates* center stage. Socrates then lets *himself* retreat by putting

6 *Symposium*, 212d-222c.

Diotima's irresistible tale center stage. Love loves the seductive shadow play of hide and seek, of revelation and retreat. We're captivated and, like any of love's captives, we can't say exactly *what's going on.* We gesture toward the stars or angels – or toward a mysterious woman. Does Socrates love Beauty itself? Diotima's beauty? The beauty of the telling? The beauties among his listeners? And what does *Kierkegaard* love in *his* thralldom? The man's intelligence? Combativeness? Poetry? Moral courage? If it's Diotima's tale that seduces Socrates, is that what smites us, too? Or is it *Socrates* who smites us? (And moving forward, if Kierkegaard smites us, perhaps it's also his Athenian companion who simultaneously enchants.) Yet shouldn't we admit that there's something quite *irregular* about coming to our philosophical convictions and endearments in this bewitching way? *And yet* . . .

Love Comes From Love

What *could* we say in favor of Diotima's story? Well, Socrates' *daimon* didn't *forbid* him from taking it seriously. But don't we need more reason for crediting this story than the mere fact that we're not *prohibited* from considering it?

Perhaps we listen, and allow the tale to steal our hearts – because *we've come to love and trust Socrates*, because we're gullible, because we just don't feel compelled to verify his sources. Would a *rational,* exclusively *interrogating* Socrates pass over this case of *falling* for Diotima, or *pass over* this case of Kierkegaard's falling for a *non-interrogating* Socrates?[7] An easygoing Socrates cagily *seduces* us – through confiding his *own* seduction (sharing a confidence breeds intimacy). He's not taken in by Alcibiades, but by this alluring tale of love and beauty, or by the mysterious woman who conveyed it. And it can't be irrelevant that we love to see Socrates put to the test. Diotima at first interrogates him, softening up his resistance, as it were. She turns Socratic method to her advantage, at the old man's expense. The sage of Athens is forced to learn from her, to be backed down by her erotic and intellectual visionary power. Later he lounges, relaxed among his friends, and casts a spell, just as Diotima had cast hers. We even see how he's bewitched the powerful Alcibiades, who arrives drunk with love.

The matter of love in the *Symposium* is not the only evidence we have for a Socrates who enacts, or radiates virtue (let's say), rather than using interrogation to define or delimit it. In *Phaedo*, we see how he absorbs belief in immortality within his life, takes it up as an aspect of his being (or becoming). Socrates is casual about his lengthy but frail arguments for immortality, uttered under a sentence of death, as he patiently awaits its date. He hints that they're less than convincing demonstrations. Yet our confidence in his *belief* in immortality is not thereby diminished. Our confidence seems solid and seems to derive from his impressive comportment, evocatively portrayed. He shows that he has no fear of an *after*life, nor any fear of *living* in this life, nor any fear of *leaving* this life. This is a kind of immortality, a defeat of death's hold on him, a freedom from death that is achieved in *this* life. As Johannes de silentio will say, Socrates becomes immortal "when he

7 This might be the madness of love, explored and praised in the *Phaedrus*.

hears the verdict," long before he drinks the poison.[8] The body may expire, but at the moment when it counts, death has no dominion. It's not a dying but a *living* Socrates – who happens to expire. And from his point of view, death is not an obstacle to his living as he would, but in fact highlights what it is to live as who he is – in a sense, *deathlessly*.[9]

We learn of love in the *Symposium* through Diotima's tale, but also by seeing the effect that Socratic beauty has on Alcibiades. Socratic beauty speaks as an irresistible inner quality or spirit projected through a rough, perhaps even repellant, exterior. This display matches a platitude – say, that true beauty is more than physical surface. But we learn the *force* of that turn of phrase through the witness of Alcibiades *smitten then and there*, and through the witness of Socrates, dispassionate in a love that Alcibiades can't grasp, and that therefore humbles and enrages him. Kierkegaard cherishes this Socrates – a biting intellect, but also a man at home among friends and in the marketplace, talking here of love and mysteries, enjoying comic theater and conviviality, all the while serene and alluring, and but a hair's breadth from violence.[10]

Philosophy is the wisdom that keeps Socrates sober in the midst of drinking, and is the love that lets him be swept up by beauty. It's serenity in a life informed by admirable convictions, upheld (at best, only partially) by a discipline that dislodges untruth. The truths of love or immortality, for example, are not brought out by interrogation. Love is vouchsafed by the alluring story of a priestess. The truth of immortality is vouchsafed by the moving display of Socrates' composed and passionate comportment in the days and hours before his death. Socrates loved to disabuse Athenians of their claim to know. He trumpeted no knowledge to replace what he took away. Yet he doesn't leave us utterly empty-handed. Plato, like Kierkegaard, builds a theater of ideas and action where characters can *live out* their truths.

We read the early and middle Platonic dialogues as Kierkegaard did, moved by the simple, radiant convictions he found apparent in the life of Socrates, convictions by which he lived and died, authenticated in his abiding by them, and in their abiding support of him. We see what it is to yield absolutely to one's vocation, to be buttressed by one's god, to hold convictions about immortality, love, or the invulnerability of "the good man" to harm, all the while remaining candidly "ignorant" of any doctrine or teaching or arguments that might successfully back them up. There's no freestanding, abstract knowledge that could make those convictions *more* convincing than the demonstrative *living out of them.* It's the Socratic *life* that speaks eloquently,

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8 *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 141. In the Hongs', translation, p. 117. Hereafter, for Hannay trans., *FTP*, for Hongs' trans., *FT.*

9 For two views of immortality as something other than an afterlife that begins at the end of a biological death, as a "deathlessness in living," or living beyond the hold of death as one lives, see D.Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, London: Macmillan, 1970, and John Herman Randall, *Plato*: *Dramatist of the Life of Reason*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, p. 214.

10 Kierkegaard sees himself as accused, like Socrates, of corruption of the youth. (Hannay, *Papers*, 47, VIII, 1, A 11), and capable of writing both tragedy and comedy in answer to Socrates' question at the end of the *Symposium* (14 July, 37, II, A 132).

and its splendor is discovered through falling in love.[11] Kierkegaard is neither the first nor last to be happily seduced by this sometime gadfly who's also a witness to love.[12]

Revising Definitions

Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation (it was called a *magister* in his day) is titled *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*.[13] His examiners might have disliked the candidate's indecorous and self-indulgent style, full of unscholarly irony and wit. But they had no problem with the presumption that Socrates is simultaneously admirable, skeptical, and pious. They could not have guessed that just a few years ahead, Kierkegaard would deploy Socratic irony and combative wit in a general critique of Danish Christendom, including the University. The student who couldn't resist writing on Socratic irony would become a thorn in their flesh precisely because he took that gadfly's irony to heart.

Kierkegaard's Socratic barbs, especially in *Unscholarly Postscript*, were especially aimed at academic pretensions to have completed a system mastering all culture-spheres – science, art, religion, ethics – indeed, all knowledge and belief. In their presumed mastery of all things human and divine, or in their aspiration to such mastery, the city's cultural elites had forgotten what it was to become a Christian, which is, among other things, to forego all such aspirations. Our lead epigraph is taken from one of Kierkegaard's last *Journal* entries. His vocation, he says, has been "*the*

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11 See my discussion of Cavell's "falling in love with the world" as a condition for living in it in "Acknowledgement, Suffering, and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," *Soundings*, Fall, 2005.

12 George Pattison picked *The Socratic Witness to Love* as the working title for the book that later appeared as *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. For the Kierkegaard-Socrates connection see Paul Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Task," Ph.D Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006; "The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of 'Taking Away'," in Paul Houe and Gordon Marino, eds, *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003, pp. 139-50; and "Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2005), reprinted (abridged) in Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, eds, *A Companion to Socrates*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 389-405. Also, Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; and David Possen, "Søren Kierkegaard and the Very Idea of Advance Beyond Socrates," Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2007. For excellent accounts of Socrates as an enigmatic exemplar, see Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

13 It might come as a surprise that in 1841 the Theology Faculty of the University of Copenhagen passed a dissertation devoted almost exclusively to the *pagan* Socrates. The Christian King of Denmark signed off as well.

Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian."[14] This should startle us in at least two ways.

First, how could Kierkegaard, an ordinary parishioner, presume to go about altering or amending a doctrinal definition of the Christian faith? That would be the exclusive prerogative of ecclesiastical authorities. Yet the Socratic task is to disabuse others of untruth, so to revise a definition might mean to unseat a *going* definition, to deflate a *current* assumption. If the conventional definition reads, "To be a Christian is to be born in a Christian country and attend church at least once," then that definition *needs* revision. Kierkegaard-Socrates could mock and deflate and so "revise" a *mistaken* definition without providing a replacement. This reading gives us a Kierkegaard-Socrates concerned to expose untruths, to attack pride, to mock the presumption to intellectual mastery. He unsettles anyone who remains complacent in a commonplace conceptual bed.

A space less cluttered by shoddy presumptions permits a better definition of Christianity to appear – in some shape or form. Perhaps Kierkegaard does more than expose bad definitions. But if he remains true to his Socratic ignorance, an emerging positive definition can't shape up as a verbal formulation or anything like a dictionary or encyclopedia entry for "Christianity." Is there another way one could be "revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian"? Potters and sculptors give their clay definition. That's not lexical revision. Perhaps a "revised definition" of what it means to be a Christian means giving a better shape to the contours of the unfolding character or way of life we'd want to call "Christian." A definition so construed is a narrative, a life defined through narrative, whose living has a narrative structure. As we imagine a painter giving better definition to an elusive countenance before her, so Kierkegaard would give better shape and contour to the shifting countenance of an elusive Christian life. The way Plato attends to the Socratic life, and the way the Gospels attend to the Christian life, so Kierkegaard could attend to Gospel and Platonic life-narratives (as well as the cautionary life-narratives of Faust or Don Juan). Taking up this task of revising a definition would amount to sketching out a collaborative Socratic-Christian identity.

There is a second respect in which the epigraph should startle. Kierkegaard declares his task to be "revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian," and then adds, "*Therefore I do not call myself a Christian*." Why this disavowal? It's reasonable, after all, to assume that Kierkegaard *is* a Christian, *always* a Christian. True, sometimes he writes as a non-Christian. But then he signals the distance between his own commitments and non-Christian ones by using pseudonyms. If nothing else, his church attendance and *Christian Discourses* should identify him as Christian. Nevertheless, he's adamant here that he does not call himself a Christian, and this avowal is made in his *own* voice. To clinch his protest, in the final issues of *The Moment* (his polemical dispatches), Kierkegaard goes further. He avows repeatedly not just that he *won't call* himself a Christian but that he's *not* one. Is it Christian or non-Christian? He says both.

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14 See *The Moment*, Hongs' trans. p. 341; I've adopted Pattison's translation, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005, p. 172.

A Christian finds work attending to the poor and sick. A Socratic gadfly finds work mocking Copenhagen's new-fangled Tivoli that boasted a side-show featuring a wax-figure, wind-up Christ.[15] When Kierkegaard puts his Socratic tasks front and center, then he might say, as in our epigraph, that his task is Socratic, that he's doing *Socratic* business, and *therefore* he won't call himself a Christian.[16] He might say (more forcefully) that he was *not* a Christian because the bar for being Christian is so high that no one clears it. Yet it's strangely haunting that on his deathbed Kierkegaard doesn't say a word about his Christian calling.

Ranking Religiousness

Are these two hats, the Socratic and the Christian, altogether of the same importance? Does one sort of religiousness take precedence over the other? *Philosophical Crumbs* has Socrates mark out an approach to truth that contrasts *unfavorably* (it seems) to a Christian one; *Unscholarly Postscript* seems to set out a hierarchy that places Socratic religious pathos "beneath" a Christian pathos; and *Sickness Unto Death* finds wrongdoing to be a matter of sin rather than, as Socrates would have it, a matter of simple ignorance. These accounts seem to place Socrates in the shadow of an even fuller Christian existence. As a *development* of Socratic religiousness, Christianity is an *advance* – so it seems.[17]

Doesn't common sense dictate that a Christian has to let Socrates step aside for Christ? Even if Johannes Climacus has Christian religiousness a step above Socratic piety, that may not suffice to show that *Søren Kierkegaard* ranks the Socratic vis-à-vis the Christian, with the Christian winning out. Kierkegaard needs a collaborative identity, Christ and Socrates in the crucial roles, *each* of utmost importance. He's *inescapably* linked to Socrates even as he's *inescapably* linked to Christ. There is textual evidence – I think it's decisive – that Kierkegaard takes his Christian and Socratic identities to be linked like hand in glove in sub-zero weather. Lacking a glove, the hand is useless; lacking a hand, the glove is useless. Ranking their *comparative* indispensability makes no sense at all. Since neither Christ nor Socrates is dispensable, both are *indispensable*. In a specific passage that we'll revisit, Kierkegaard speaks of Socrates and Christ as representing two "qualitatively different magnitudes." The upshot is that we lack an *independent standard* for calibrating their comparative indispensability. We'd be mistaken to claim that the Christian life is a step up on the Socratic life, not because it isn't, but because it makes no sense to say one way or the other – either that *it is* or that *it isn't*.

This late passage unseats the idea that a Christian existence is "one up on" the Socratic and also challenges a view whose dependence on rank ordering may not be obvious. Thinking adverbially, we might take Kierkegaard as a Christian who happened to think and act *Socratically*.[18] But we might also take Kierkegaard as

15 See my discussion of Tivoli and its wax replica of Christ, Chapter Eight.

16 I thank Steve Webb for this. For further discussion, see note 9, Chapter Three.

17 "Between one human and another, the Socratic relationship is the highest, the truest." *Fragments*, Hongs' trans., p. 55.

18 John D. Caputo suggested this view in conversation.

a Socratic who happened to think and act *Christianly*. Or yet again, Kierkegaard might be a marvelous figure who lived *Christianly Socratically*. Now if we accept only the *first* of these descriptions, namely that Kierkegaard is a Christian acting and thinking Socratically, then we're smuggling in a ranking. We're excluding two other plausible descriptions. Kierkegaard needn't argue that the first option is false, nor that the second or third is true. The evidence tilts toward the view that Kierkegaard just abstains from endorsing *any* ranking. He was ambivalent about, if not outright opposed to, the idea of grading Socrates against Christ, or Christ against Socrates. There are several other reasons to drop the sticky intuition that for a Christian, Socratic-pagan religiousness must be set aside.

Socrates Surpassed?

The fundamental intuition that Christian life is a step up on the Socratic is challenged in the *first* place by the passage where Kierkegaard denies that a yardstick exists for making the required comparative assessment (we return to this passage in Chapter Three). It's challenged in the *second* place by the implications of a revelation in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* – Kierkegaard can't help but believe that "*Socrates has become a Christian.*"[19] Has Socrates renounced his old identity? Kierkegaard doesn't claim this, and if he believes that Socrates has become Christian while still retaining his Socratic identity, it must be possible for at least one life to be both fully Socratic and fully Christian. The bombshell about Socrates becoming Christian challenges the *existential* force of the *Postscript* machinery that pulls asunder Socratic "religiousness A" and Christian "religiousness B." Kierkegaard does not say that Socrates has becomes *less Socratic* in becoming Christian, nor that in becoming a Christian, he's made a qualitative *advance* on his initial, "merely pagan," standing. Socrates could be pictured as assuming an additional role – not as giving up or diminishing a former role. A concert pianist could become a conductor without becoming *less* a pianist, or *no longer* a pianist. If one can be fully pianist and fully conductor (finding both roles indispensable to one's identity), then perhaps, on analogy, one can be fully Socratic and fully Christian. One could conduct and play simultaneously, and if that weren't an option for a particular performance, one still would not lose one's pianist-identity on the night one served as a conductor.

The *third* reason to resist the fundamental intuition that Christian religiousness must advance on the Socratic arises when we ask, "From what position can such an evaluation be made?" What standing, in particular, does Climacus have for ranking these extraordinary figures? Why not let heaven be judge? Which is to say, judge *not* – period! Kierkegaard's deathbed testimony that his vocation was always Socratic (and the notable *absence* of final testimony that his vocation was *Christian*) should encourage a Socratic reserve, a suspicion of ultimate ontological rankings. If Kierkegaard embraces a substantive Socratic ignorance, this means abjuring a "god's eye view" – the only position, it seems, from which a comparative objective

19 *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 54.

ranking of religiousness could be attempted. Furthermore, grading these exemplars presumes that we have a clear grasp of the figures that stand before us – a doubtful proposition.

We're consigned to a deep agnosticism (or *should* be), not about the inestimable or even *absolute* worth of Socrates or Christ, but about their *comparative* worth, one measured against the other. To assume that "religiousness A" will be diminished with the appearance of "religiousness B" puts at naught both *Socratic* skeptical reserve and *Christian* humility. To assess the worth of but one of these exemplary figures means that one upgrades oneself to a position of *moral jurisdiction* in this matter. Socrates or Christ properly grasp *us* (we don't grasp *them*). Seeing this would cool the impulse to nail either with a measured worth.

There's a *fourth* challenge to the idea that Socratic religiousness will diminish as Christianity assumes its "proper" place. Johannes Climacus supports the idea that "B religiousness" is an advance on "A religiousness", but he leaves the existential *feel* of the *transition* to the Christian under-described. We get abstract distinctions between ignorance and sin, the absurd and the paradox, the transcendent and the immanent, but how do these play out "on the street"? When it comes to describing the felt, qualitative differences between an ethical and an aesthetical life, Kierkegaard is fulsome. The ethical Judge Wilhelm devotes hundreds of pages to what the aesthete would give up and what he would gain were he to change his allegiances. Socrates has become a Christian, but what has he lost and gained, in tangible terms? Without a lively sense of an *existential friction* (or at least a *contrast*) between ways of life, it's not so clear what the proposed advance amounts to in practical or experiential terms. There will be obvious *cultural* indications of difference: a Greek temple is not a Lutheran church. There will be liturgical differences: a Socratic prayer will be easy to distinguish from a Christian one. But in what we've called the moral-spiritual life "as it's lived on the street," the difference becomes elusive. A new hybrid creature might find her Christian side deferring easily to her Socratic, and her Socratic side deferring easily to her Christian, like a fluid marriage where neither *needs* to claim ultimate privilege.

Fifth and finally, Climacus is a less than reliable purveyor of Kierkegaard's settled views. Johannes might distribute *misinformation* (sprinkled with enough solid information to make him credible). It would violate Kierkegaard's authorial strategy to be too straightforward about his own beliefs – to declare, for instance, that *his* views must always trump the views of a pseudonym. It's testimony to his Socratic reserve that Kierkegaard leaves us hanging without answers. Johannes may be indulging his yen for dialectics ("proving" the respects in which "B" is an advance on "A") in a situation where the greater part of virtue would be to remain silent.

Overall, whatever their *practice*, both Kierkegaard and Climacus *say* that they *distrust* wordy disquisitions.[20] The whole *Postscript* apparatus of technical

20 In his epilogue to *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, George Pattison contrasts "The Christian Witness" to "The Simple Wise Man" [Socrates]. The book-length literature in English of the tension or convergence of the Socratic and the Christian in Kierkegaard is slim. Recent very helpful contributions are Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, and the Muench and Possen works mentioned in note 12 above.

distinctions – religiousness A and religiousness B, the objective and the subjective, the transcendental and the immanent, guilt and sin, the paradox and the absurd, the comic and the ironic – might work to draw in (intellectually) and then to mock a bevy of grave, humorless professors, clinging to these terms of art, and wildly overconfident of their ability to climb. (Luckily, *we're* not in that benighted group!)

Imagine Kierkegaard watching, amused, as Climacus shows off his anti-academic/academic skills. He might relish the thought of unstuffing Climacus' excess knowledge, taking Climacus down a bit – especially when he turns didactic, confidently unrolling his dialectical charts! Since Climacus is a humorist, he might *himself* step outside a passage of his text to mock its goings on, enjoying a twinge of ironic self-deprecation. He might relish a quiet superiority as he locates himself knowingly as sub-Christian – while readers are unknowingly sub-sub even as they *think* they're Christian. Come to think of it, Climacus might take quiet pleasure also in downgrading his teacher, Socrates – visiting revenge on the instructor who makes him feel shamefully inadequate.

The possibilities for *humor* in these *Postscript* flurries are infinite, which rules out the humorless proposal that the overriding aim of *Postscript* is to provide an analytic mind with a technical apparatus designed to enable specialists to recite the conceptual ins and outs of religiousness B or A. Such grave analysis undermines the aims of this self-described non-Christian humorist, and instills a cool analytic stare that freezes up its object – in this case, freezes up the lively spirit of a Socratic and Christian identity. Look at the *Postscript*'s subtitle, *Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation – an Existential Contribution* and the title, in the more appropriate idiom suggested by Alastair Hannay: "*Concluding Unscholarly Addendum to Philosophical Crumbs* (or *Trifles*)." These As and Bs must be taken with a grain of salt.[21]

I've laid out five considerations that challenge the "fundamental intuition" that a Christian standpoint necessarily diminishes a Socratic one. Perhaps no single consideration is decisive. Nevertheless, there's reason to ride this plausible and attractive position – that Kierkegaard affirms a collaborative identity, and that such an affirmation doesn't require that Socrates and Christ be rank-ordered. Socrates needs Christian charity and love of neighbor, and Christ needs Socratic interrogation and vision. Each supports cognitive and interpersonal humility. It might well seem *unchristian* for a Christian to place herself in advance of a pagan – of *any* stature, let alone of the stature of a Socrates.

Socrates Meets Christ

How can we begin to picture the collaboration in Kierkegaard's life and writing of both a Christian and a Socratic spirit? Socrates is a model for a kind of earnest seeking-striving not unlike a *Christian* seeking-striving. Now if a decadent Christian culture is the major deterrent to Christian seeking-striving, then to become Christian

21 These are Hannay's renderings. See his *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 315. See Chapters Ten and Twelve below for a discussion of irony and humor in *Postscript,* and especially the last minute "revocation" of that work.

requires that one become Socratic.[22] His questioning is needed to force one out of an only *cultural* Christendom – in order to become Christian. Socrates *answers* Christian needs. As Kierkegaard's author Anti-Climacus declares, what is needed is "a new Socrates." "Socrates, Socrates, Socrates," he cries, invoking his name three times. "Absorbed as it is in so much learning, what the world needs is a new *Socrates*."[23]

Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov imagines Christ's return to 16th Century Spain to minister to the people's needs. *The Grand Inquisitor* is Ivan's "poem" for Alyosha, something he calls "a preposterous thing."[24] It depicts an event about as crazy as Socrates becoming Christian, or as Socrates entering Copenhagen. Kierkegaard imagines Anti-Climacus crying "*Socrates, Socrates*," letting us know whom *he* wants returned to minister to our needs. Let's continue this imaginative conceit. If Socrates returns, waking up in Copenhagen, so too, we might imagine that while he's in residence, Christ enters the city. Would Socrates then turn aside, retreat, or attack? Or would Christ, finding him there, turn aside, retreat, or attack?

We might think that the city was not big enough for both of them. Alternatively, each might be big enough to acknowledge the other. And if we take Dostoevsky's cautionary tale to heart, they might acknowledge that they *need* each other. In light of his tale, we must suppose, sadly, that Grand Inquisitors and their misled flocks will always be with us – will *be* us. There will always be Christendom. But if cultural Christendom will always be with us, we'll always need Socrates. As Kierkegaard takes up his *critique of the city*, Socrates is center stage, making it vulnerable to a more specific Christian address or revelation regarding (for example) love of neighbor and of God. However, if a Christian address or revelation inevitably ossifies, rigidifies, reifies, then Socrates will remain a permanent resident and on call. Dostoevsky's fear, and perhaps Kierkegaard's as well, is that the appearance of Christ will not ensure that the city will change. It's likely to crucify once more. And so Socrates retains his commission.

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22 *CUP*, p. 556. "Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any consideration of becoming aware of the dialectical B [Christianity]." Socrates might be the existential condition for hearing the Christian revelation. Religiousness A then becomes a possibility inherent in human nature. As such, it can appear anywhere and at any time in history, making Socrates always a potential presence in Christendom. Socratic questioning – we might say philosophical questioning – is ever-present as a condition of Christian faith. In *Unscholarly Postscript*, Johannes aims not to go further than Socrates (as Hegelians might), but to expose what it *means for him to become a Christian.* (Although it's often helpful to distinguish a pseudonym from Kierkegaard, just as often Kierkegaard's views are indistinguishable from views of a pseudonym. Kierkegaard's late journal entry, "*My task is the Socratic task*," repeats precisely the view of Johannes Climacus.)

23 *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay, New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 124; Hongs' trans., p. 92. Hereafter *SUD*.

24 Interestingly, for a Kierkegaard reader, one recent translation has Ivan call his poem "an absurd thing." Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhovsky, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, p. 246. (This sentence is the lead into Chapter V.)

Who Needs Critique?

What does this imply for those who don't take up inquiries or critiques that are explicitly Socratic? Can one be a Christian without knowing "what it means to become a Christian" – without having thought it through, or cultivated one's Socratic self? Kierkegaard can't expect every would-be Christian to plow through *Concluding Postscript.* Perhaps a simple believer can know *tacitly* what it is to become a Christian, without being schooled in the sophisticated paraphernalia that *Postscript* provides. Tolstoy's simple peasants were true Christians but ignorant of Socrates and Climacus. But to puzzle over *them*, Kierkegaard might say, is to neglect the task at hand. To worry about what makes unschooled feudal peasants miles away count as true Christians is not the business at hand, which is first and foremost to worry about what *I* am and *we* are and could be. The audience *Postscript* has in mind is not simple peasants.

If you or I or Kierkegaard's local citizenry are already reading *Postscript*, or reading responsively *about* it, we've become perforce an audience he can admonish. He admonishes in terms he'd kindly spare his less bookish companions on the street – and certainly, in terms that he'd spare distant peasants, however pertinent those terms would be for us. *We* need – and the "we" here is primarily those who claim some rough affinity to Christian culture, moral practice, and belief – *we* need this exploration because *we're not yet* Christian, spiritually speaking. Yet presumably *some* in the realm *think* they are. To narrow the target of address, Climacus aims Socratic skepticism at those intrigued by Hegelian or mock-Hegelian disquisitions, and who nevertheless picture themselves as Christians, more *developed* Christians, in *virtue* of their Hegelian (or simply fashionable) aims and achievements. Skepticism dissolves ingrained *intellectual* presumptions – those that intellectuals are apt to harbor. And Climacus assumes that Socratic *midwifery* will get we intellectuals born toward better things.

Not Calling Oneself Christian

Socrates sets the course for a traverse across the broad sweep of Kierkegaard's work and life. Consider again those lines penned only weeks before his death where Kierkegaard reaffirms his unwavering Socratic vocation. We can include a fuller version of the passage. Here's the epigraph, less trimmed down, in George Pattison's translation:

> The only analogy I have for what I am doing is Socrates. My task is the Socratic task of revising the definition of what it means to be a Christian. Therefore I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it plain that nobody else is either.[25]

25 This is George Pattison's translation, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 172. The standard translation is misleading here. (See *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Hongs, p. 341.) Where Pattison has "I can make it plain that nobody else is [Christian] either," the Hongs have "I can make it manifest that the others are that [i.e., Christian] *even less*" [my emphasis]. The comparative "*even less*" puts Kierkegaard in an untenable position, having him claim that

Let's pause with those parts of this passage that I earlier trimmed out. If Climacus is revising a definition, he wears his Socratic hat; that makes calling himself a Christian somewhat beside the point. He's doing Socratic, not Christian duty. With the full quotation, we can see his rejection of a Christian status from yet another angle. Not calling himself a Christian, he says, will "keep the ideal free."

One way to tie down the detail of a moral (or moral-religious) ideal is to imagine an exemplar living it out. Now if Kierkegaard claims that he's a Christian, he runs the risk of casting his life as exemplary. But in that case, "the ideal" of being a Christian would not be "kept free." It would be bound up with the example he lives out. That would deflate the ideal, making it no more than the haphazard (or ordered) life that Kierkegaard happens to lead.

When Kierkegaard pleads for 'the ideal" to remain free, he means free from the vagaries of his personal existence – or *any* sublunary existence. This is to say that the bar for being Christian must always be higher than anyone's actual accomplishment. Moreover, it says that, however convenient a *cultural* Christian identity may be, such convenience does not bear on the impossibly strenuous demands of a *religiously* Christian point of view. From that non-cultural standpoint, persons *never* are Christian, but at best, strive to *become that*. For Kierkegaard to call himself Christian would be vain – not very *Christian*! There's a rhetorical point to notice, as well. Kierkegaard's *cultural* identity remains Christian – that's how others will place him. He attends church. And even after his bitter attacks on the Church, on the occasion of his burial, and to the chagrin of a cousin who protested loudly, the Church officiated and so called him its own. Yet any number of his contemporaries could easily feel offense at Kierkegaard's barbs – for instance, his sharp quip that there are no Christians in Copenhagen. His neighbor could feel the sting. *He*, good citizen that he is, has been accused of *not being a Christian*! Now if Kierkegaard avows *himself* to be Christian, then his neighbor has a quick retort: "*You*, Kierkegaard, are *equally* a city resident. So the moral onus falls just as well on *you* – in fact, you're worse than me: *you cast the first stone*!" This parry gets deflected if Kierkegaard concedes at the outset that he does not call himself a Christian. His neighbor, then, has lost his target.[26]

At the level of the street, it seems, it would be a tactical mistake for Kierkegaard to call himself a Christian. And at a more theoretical level, as we've seen, it would *also* be a mistake: absolutely no one meets the bar for being (as opposed to *becoming*) a Christian, and so Kierkegaard does not. Let me make a final – and minor – remark on this issue.

Kierkegaard says ". . . I do not call myself a Christian, . . . *but I can make it plain that nobody else is either*." It's easy to hear this last remark as a petty "tit for tat,"

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he is *more Christian* than his neighbors. True, Kierkegaard attacks his neighbors' so-called Christianity, but surely *not*, as I've argued, on the presumption that *he is more Christian* than they are – except in the very limited sense that if one is not a Christian, it's better to be aware of this, and he, unlike his countrymen, *is* aware of his failings.

26 Compare *Point of View*, p. 43. "If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone . . . who declares himself *not* to be a Christian." On how Kierkegaard hopes he'd respond were a pagan outside Christendom to ask him if he were a Christian, see Chapter Three, note 9.

as if Kierkegaard were warning his offended neighbor: "*Watch out!* If you judge *me* for admitting *I'm* not Christian, I'll turn it back and show that *you're* not one *either*!" This sets Kierkegaard in a spat of nasty mud-slinging. But a more salutary reading has him making his familiar point that the Christian ideal is just too high for mere mortals to attain. It's plain that *nobody* is Christian. One can hold this without slinging mud. And here the second epigraph can come into play. If not a Christian (though becoming one), Kierkegaard at least could be the "new Socrates" that Copenhagen so desperately needed.

Excessive Polemics

Socrates was a political-religious irritant in Athens, as Kierkegaard would become in Copenhagen. Poul Martin Møller, Kierkegaard's teacher, friend, and mentor, passed on a warning to this budding writer-to-be. The career was not quite launched. Møller was ill – in fact, in the throes of dying. No doubt he prepared his parting words carefully. He worried that his feisty friend and student could be "too polemical." Møller deftly captures Kierkegaard's genius and deepest pleasure. He sees that the burden Kierkegaard carries is to master his acutely polemical disposition. Of course, a dyed-in-the-wool polemicist would polemically reject this advice, and perhaps take up polemics with even greater vigor. Yet perhaps it's otherwise – perhaps Kierkegaard *heeded* his good friend.

His challenge was to find a calling that would allow his natural talent for polemics to flourish, peaked not just by any passing opportunity, but inspired by a noble end. The higher and more urgent the calling, the more legitimate polemics in its service would seem. Can one be "excessive" in pursuing a life whose ideal is as demanding and comprehensive as a Christian calling – or, for that matter, can one be "excessive" in pursuing a Socratic calling? The goal of being Socratic or of being Christian might be pitched high enough that no amount of polemical work on its behalf could be too much. Kierkegaard could take Møller's warning to heart, not by foregoing polemics, but by deploying them for the best of ends. The gadfly of Copenhagen was as polemical as could be in the service of his ideal.

The End of the Day

As he approaches death, Socrates seems serene, assured that he has done as his *daimon* urged. He's kept to the path allotted him. He does not regret the polemical "excess" that has brought the wrath of Athens down on him, and Kierkegaard would not regret his "excess," either – not regret those sharp attacks that brought the wrath of Copenhagen down on him. Bruce Kirmmse lays out the parallel:

> When Kierkegaard lay on *his* deathbed, he was satisfied in the knowledge that he had completed his life's work and had placed a torpedo under the ark of the Established Church. He knew that the final issue of *The Moment* lay ready for publication, and he knew that the most incisive and troubling article in that issue was the one entitled "My Task," in which

> Kierkegaard repeatedly states "I am not a Christian," explaining his position by stating that "the only analogy I hold before myself is Socrates." [27]

Kierkegaard never wavers in his Socratic witness. Here is Kirmmse's forthright summary of the life.

> [T]he Greek gadfly remained Kierkegaard's polemical-ironic *daimon*, emblematic of the highest human relationship. The elusive Kierkegaard remained Socratic through and through, from his dissertation to his deathbed.[28]

27 Bruce Kirmmse, "Socrates in the Fast Lane: Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* on the University's Velocifere," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001, pp. 98-9. Kierkegaard remembered Moller's worrying that "[you're] so polemical . . . that it is quite frightful."

28 Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

Kierkegaard's Double Vocation: Socrates Becomes Christian

It is true, he was not a Christian;
that I know, and yet
I am thoroughly convinced
that he has become one.
– Point of View

Kierkegaard's cascade of writing is meant to catch his readers mid-stride. Although some citizens of Copenhagen may have missed the Socrates in their midst, an expanding city of readers has been caught by his work in the century and a half since his death in 1855 – testimony to the apparently inexhaustible power of his writing. It's an open question, of course, whether the growing city of appreciative readers has done better than Copenhagen at *heeding* the aim of his mission. How many have let their lives be *changed*? But how, after all, would that be measured?

At the level of culture, Kierkegaard has had a deep and continuing impact in France, England, Germany, and Japan – not to mention Spain and Scandinavia. We could trace impacts in New York City, Paris, or Freiberg, or we could tally the number of culture-shaping writers who link their work to his, from Ibsen and Auden to Heidegger and Wittgenstein, from Dinesen and Tillich to Sartre and Nishida. When texts *stop* evoking such change, they're on the way to archival tombs. He belongs among the indispensable few who leave an endlessly revelatory body of work. These texts are "tales from the mighty dead," tales that won't be buried, that keep us reeling, that we can't help retelling and rethinking.[1]

Unsettling the World

Jousting Assumptions

In casting for a living exemplar who could orient his life, an "idea for which he could live and die," Kierkegaard found his answer in Socrates, a figure who provides him with a pattern of conversational encounter, civic polemic, and surpassing vision. This image mobilizes his powers of observation, wit, polemic, and writerly expression in genres he would invent as well as those close at hand. Kierkegaard

1 Robert Brandon's phrase, from his title, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

would harness his budding energies, yielding to a magnetic Socratic path of self-expression and interrogation. The civic dimension of this pull of the Socratic would find him teasing from the citizens of Copenhagen their slumbering spiritual needs. This is not a didactic Socrates or Kierkegaard. There are no positive instructions and no public message kept "on point." Presumptions are stripped away, and in this respect Socrates and Kierkegaard are a negative discursive force, unseating any assumption that an interlocutor is complete, *as is*, needing no awakening. Following his mentor, Kierkegaard mocks Copenhagen's educated elites, so overstuffed with idle knowledge that they're choking.[2] He was a first responder, clearing out the passageways.

Kierkegaard published an undersized seeming-academic book that, by its title (*Philosophical Crumbs*), promised only leftovers. He then published an overstuffed sequel that also promised to be unscholarly, an addendum that by its subtitle was a mere "mimic, pathetic compilation" (*Concluding Unscholarly Postscript*). He wanted to *cut back* the consumption of learning, and to *remove* untruth. This is not clearing rubble for a more "scientific" or "rigorous" edifice in the manner of Descartes, whose skeptical doubt is a preparation for rebuilding. "What modern philosophy busies itself with so much – the removing of every presupposition in order to *begin* with nothing – was also done by Socrates in his way, in order to *end* with nothing."[3] Kierkegaard, too, could "end with nothing."

Of course, it's not quite right to say that he wants to end with nothing. He exhibits Socrates as an exemplar of a worthy life. Kierkegaard wants to end up having encouraged his readers to live out a pattern displayed by his provocations and by his figurations of worthy (and unworthy) lives. But from the standpoint of academic learning, theological doctrine, or fashionable opinion, Kierkegaard would indeed aim to "end with nothing." He'd embrace a kind of Socratic ignorance of matters we'd today call metaphysical or theological. He'd refuse knowledge of doctrinal or systematic "answers" that in his view could only further clog the already turgid flow of opinion. Kierkegaard disguised himself as Socrates in order to direct citizens *away* from places of so-called instruction: the press, the church, the university. In his eyes, didacticism was deeply suspect.

When it came to packaging his efforts, Kierkegaard, like Plato, invents new vehicles bearing only a rough resemblance to books (though booksellers sell them). His inventive flair threatens our conception of that familiar printed conveyer. It's as if the covers break to reveal a living theater, or a parody of scripture, or a teasing puzzle, or a wonderfully enigmatic portrait, even a *parable* of scripture.[4] Kierkegaard

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2 *CUP*, pp. 187, 275; see also *SUD*, pp. 90, 92.

3 *JP*, 1:754 (my emphasis).

4 Clark West remarks that Kierkegaard might be providing a "parable of scripture." As he puts it, "Barth wrote that Mozart's music was itself a 'parable of the kingdom' and that even a dog could be a parable of the kingdom – meaning a repetition of scripture in which one is given back in a new way, as a gift, words (or events or things) that one had thought to have grown stale (like old crumbs)." He continues, "Kierkegaard's continual references to Nathan (who of course, told the very first parable to David after his 'lapse' with Bathsheba) might make the point that we, like David in that story from 2 Samuel, are faced with Nathan's long pointy finger, 'Thou art the man!'" Kierkegaard writes (often indirectly, and parabolically) to

publishes something that *looks* like a book under the title *Prefaces*. It turns out that it's a collection of nothing *but* prefaces – something like a dust jacket wrapped around a brick of cheese. Or like an invitation to sit down for a read, only to discover that there's nothing *there*.

Is *Either/Or* two books in one (an "either" and an "or")? Or should we pull out *The Seducer's Diary* and get three books? Actually, there are six or seven book-length, self-sufficient "books" within this "single book." And what kind of "book" is a six hundred-page addendum or "postscript" that follows on the heels of something best translated *philosophical crumbs*?[5] Again, books have authors, but who, exactly, *authors* these bookstore purchases? Are Victor Eremita, Nicholas Notebene, or Constantine Constantius *bone fide* authors?

Pseudonyms raise a Socratic question: what *is* an author? Is a pseudonym a *pseudo*-author? Does *Either/Or* have one or two authors? (Perhaps it has more.) Who's *responsible* for these sentences and chapters? Wittgenstein claimed that when you purchased his *Tractatus*, you were missing the *real* book, the one on ethics that was outside *Tractatus* and couldn't (logically) be written.[6] Perhaps Kierkegaard is always pointing to a book that's impossible to write, a non-book we'd have to remain silent about. Meanwhile, he'll write books by pseudonyms, hinting, thereby, that his real "tractatus" resides elsewhere. And perhaps the author lies elsewhere, too.

There are much larger definitional "puzzles" to pursue, the biggest, of course, being how to define that protean, shifting creature, a human being – and what a *worthy* one would be. We seek a "definition" for a path that's ours. Could that path be double, Kierkegaard might ask, traced by Socrates *and* Christ? He draws us toward such questions, large and small. The words and silences of his writing give us room to exercise our ingenuity. Passion, imagination, and spirit are snapped wide awake. Reading becomes the sort of philosophical therapy that Greek philosophers prized. These puzzling, eloquent, and searching deliverances give us space to meditate – and, in their silences, to find *ourselves* through finding *their* deepest value. To value the soul is to value the self's deepest passion, its deepest value. As W.E. Hocking writes, it's "to value the Valuer," to "prize the personal center of caring, the heart."[7] As Kierkegaard's writings expose and bring to birth our deepest passion, our centers of caring, they work like sacraments, like vessels of Value.

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make his readers David to Kierkegaard's Nathan. As I suggest in Chapter One, my writing here becomes, in part, my David responding to Kierkegaard's Nathan. Kierkegaard requires a story from us, even as he tells us his story of finding the story of his life. Then his presence as a scholarly problem shifts into his presence as a figure demanding an existential accounting from us. I thank West for this suggestion.

5 See *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Repetition*, ed. Edward F. Mooney, trans. M. Piety, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 forthcoming. See Chapter One, note 17, on "crumbs" (or "scraps" or "trifles") as better than "fragments" as a translation of *smuler*.

6 Letter to Ficker quoted in Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973, p. 192.

7 W.E. Hocking, unpublished Gifford Lectures, 1941.

Athens in Christendom

A caricature has Kierkegaard tossing out reason to make an anxious leap at faith. From that, you might suppose he'd have nothing but praise for Tertullian, who asked early on, *What has Athens to do with Jerusalem*? – as if a Christian city could do without Athens with its pagans, especially those who practiced rational interrogation. But Kierkegaard accepted Socrates and so Athens, too. Despite his wry deployment of terms like "the absurd" and "the paradox," he won't divorce Athens from Jerusalem. "The absurd" often means only that something falls outside the clear blue sky of Reason: enigmas, incongruities, dilemmas, conceptual and experiential tangles; love and poetry. A paradox might resemble a profound idea that hasn't yet been worked out – perhaps something like a Kantian antinomy before it gets laid out formally. [8]

Socrates gives a specifically *philosophical* launch for Kierkegaard's critique of academic abstractions, the Danish Church, or middle-class complacency – a launch from Athens, as it were. And Athens does not lack religion. Socrates is concerned for the soul, counseled by a god or *daimon*, and acquires his vocation from a religious oracle. The truth Kierkegaard sought was not unlike a Socratic *moral-religious* truth, a truth one could embody, could live *with*, or live *in*, truthfully – true to its demands. It was eternal in the sense of being free from fashionable or timely opinion, those fickle changing shadows of conventional good sense. All this brings Kierkegaard close to Athens – in fact, within it, from where he might attest, as he does in the *Attack* literature, that he is *not* a Christian.[9] All the while, the *Christian Discourses* and *Works of Love* have him sing full-throated as a poet of Christian faith. The conclusion seems inescapable that he resides in Athens *and* Jerusalem.

Let me explore in more detail how Socrates is religious. Then I'll review how Kierkegaard declines to rank Socratic religiousness lower than Christian piety, which prepares us for the astonishing claim that "*Socrates has become Christian*." Finally, I'll remark on Kierkegaard's *downscaling* of knowledge and doctrine even as he *elevates* love and poetry and officiates at a wedding of Socrates and Christ.

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8 "The Paradox" becomes a technical term more narrowly focused than Kierkegaard's frequent and informal allusion to "a paradox." Here, I can't go into his sometimes elaborate distinctions between the absurd, a paradox, the paradoxical, the paradox, and so forth. See my discussion of "the absurd" and of a place for "domesticated reason" in my *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991, p. 55, 82f, for example. See also Chapter Seven for a discussion of Kierkegaard's forcing oppositions into antinomies and a subsequent "equipollence," where reason can't resolve the tension.

9 "I am not a Christian" deprives his interlocutors of the retort "On what basis can you say *you're* a Christian and we're *not*!" However, in *Armed Neutrality*, in *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, he says that if he were asked by threatening *pagans*, he would say "I am a Christian." Under threat of death in Christendom, the most he could say is "I trust to God that I am a Christian." Short of that explicit threat, while in battle with Christendom, he will say "I am not a Christian." Steve Webb reminds me of these passages. Kierkegaard is intensely aware that communication always requires taking into account one's auditor's conceptual-cultural-personal standpoint. For that reason, repeating a doctrine will usually be a wasted attempt at communication of religious truth.

Religion's Generous Ambit

Socratic Reverence or Piety

In *The Religion of Socrates*, Mark L. McPherran takes a usefully generous view of religion as a "common human response to the uncharted territories of life."[10] Given this wide ambit, the tragic poets are religious celebrants, as any classicist would know. There's a distinctive reverence or piety, for instance, in those haunting lines of Sophocles:

> Many are the wonders and the terrors,
> and none more wonderful or terrible
> than humankind.[11]

Here wonder and terror are not responses directed toward a divinity but toward the uncanny undergoings of humankind as it traverses "the uncharted territories of life." The poet adopts a long and deep perspective. And here we have the poet-translator Robert Fitzgerald voice a similarly capacious view of the religious:

> So hard at best is the human lot, and so great is the beauty we can apprehend, that only a religious conception of things can take in the extremes and meet the case.[12]

So far, giving Sophocles and Fitzgerald their due, the tenor of the religious seems to be evoked in wonders and terrors, in sufferings and beauties, and in the sense of humankind being caught in tensions between these extremes – for example caught in tensions that resist easy articulation or reconciliation. Religion, we might think, is living in this unfinished world of dark and light – suffering these inescapable, often painful discords in the sea of the unknown. We might imagine awe, fear, love, respect or exaltation as ways of response that take on a natural religious expression in song and ritual around the phases of life – death and birth and family and political life, say – where these dimensions of existence can take on sharp and often discordant relief.

The specific tenor of a religious articulation in art or ritual or public action will vary enormously, between one culture to the next, one group or person to the next. But some responsiveness to these "limit situations" of birth and death, place and others, say, and the tensions they embody, seems inevitable. Socrates has a place for beauty and love but seems to minimize the importance of terror or affliction. That places him apart from a tragic-religious vision of things. Philosophy, in his view,

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10 Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, p. 11.

11 Sophocles, *Antigone*, first choral ode, my transliteration.

12 Here is the full passage from Fitzgerald: "So hard at best is the human lot, and so great is the beauty we can apprehend, that only a religious conception of things can take in the extremes and meet the case. It seems to me there are a few things everyone can humbly try to hold onto: love and mercy (and humor) in everyday living: the quest for exact truth in language and affairs of the intellect: self-recollection or prayer:and the peace, the composed energy of art." See his obituary, *The New York Times*, 17 Jan 1985.

ought to domesticate a fear of death, and make the good man immune to affliction. So his religious responses are neither Christian nor those of a tragic poet. He puts strain on old pieties even as he maintains loyalty to the city's oracles and festivals.

Socrates undermines a tragic view of life while inaugurating a would-be new religion. Spelling out how this occurs historically would take us into complex and lengthy accounts we can ill-afford to follow, for all we need is to display a range of possibilities that compose religion's wide ambit. Gods, festivals, sacrifice, prayer belong within that ambit, as well as refined visions such as Diotima's, which Socrates adopts. She expands beauty to include not just its expected fall upon a youthful face but also its rise toward a magnetic eternal height, inspiring ascent. Socrates' visions, divinities, prayers, or ceremonies find him poetically and constructively reverent – not just a destructive critic of what passed in his city for reverence or piety.

McPherran suggests three sectors of this inescapable form of human responsiveness. First are rituals and ceremonies, which include funeral observances, weddings, blessings for meals or travelers. Socrates' last act, as the poison takes its course, is to discharge a debt owed a household deity, Asclepius. He also observed a ritual obligation to consult his oracle. Second are stories, dramas, and words of wisdom – Homeric epics, the plays of Sophocles, Biblical proverbs and Jeremiah's lamentations. Plato's drama of Socrates' life, trial and death belongs with the best of religious dramas, wherein persons face mortality, value friends, cope with the deepest conflicts, struggle with their city, with injustice, with tensions between "upbeat" views of last things and darker, tragic views.[13]

Third are numerous convictions that serve to steady the unnerving quality – the terror and the allure – of those "uncharted territories" that elicit religious responsiveness. They might concern birth and death, for instance, taking them as items of enormous interest, fear, and wonder. Socrates tells us that we know nothing of death and therefore should not fear it (though, logically, ignorance just as likely supports fear). His *conviction* wins us over, lived out as fearlessness, and related to a conviction of the soul's capacity (in some sense) to *defeat* death. Then there's his conviction that one should abjure injustice, "obey one's superiors," and defer to the gods and one's *daimon*. Other religious sensibilities will feature contrasting convictions about souls, divinities, or hopes and fears of an afterlife. There are convictions about family, sexuality, sense of place or of the fruitfulness or barrenness of earth. These might be rooted in the need to cope not just with suffering and death, but with place, nourishment, and shelter. Why am I rooted *here*, not there, with just *these* means of sustenance, in *this* family, in need of just *this* protection?

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13 Stanley Cavell takes Thoreau at his word in claiming that he's writing sacred text, which from a literary point of view, Cavell says, means he must adopt a "form that comprehends creation, fall, judgment, and redemption; within it he will have discretion over how much poetry to include, and the extent of the moral code he prescribes; and there is room in it for an indefinite amound of history and for a smaller epic or two." *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981, p. 14f. One wonders, then, to what extent Plato writes "sacred text," given Cavell's depiction of what that would be likely to encompass. See also the suggestion explored in note 4 above that Kierkegaard might be writing a "parable of scripture."

This elemental threefold responsiveness gets institutionalized. Ceremonies and rituals are codified in rules or law, stories are given canonical and liturgical standing, and convictions are given doctrinal or creedal status. Thus a "primitive," seminal, no doubt initially pre-reflective responsiveness gains a cultural structure and momentum that enables authoritative expansion and transmission, mother to child, village to village, generation to generation.[14]

With regard to the depth and refinement of his responsiveness, Socrates may be the most pious of all Athenians, McPherran avers. In that case, the charge of impiety would reflect mainly the impiety of his accusers. His trademark protest of ignorance signals his acknowledgement of wonders beyond our reach, provenance of the gods alone. His deference to temple oracles and household deities and his *daimon* signals unpretentious reverence. He maintains piety in the face of death and loves his city unfailingly. His embrace of immortality, if not logically demonstrated, then vividly *lived out*, shows a religious attunement to last things. His piety shows eloquently in his steadfast *care for the soul* – his own, his friends', his fellow citizens' – a devotion in stark contrast to a commonplace and quite *impious* pursuit of the usual siren calls of wealth, power, pleasure or fame.

Joining Religion, Philosophy, Poetry

Socrates inhabits aspects of a deeply pious sensibility that is simultaneously deeply *philosophical.* This challenges a simplistic contrast of Biblical faith and Greek wisdom, of unreasoned faith and faithless reason. This convergence of the religious and the philosophical makes Socrates so much more than solely an intellectualist critic. Seeing this convergence in his life helps deflate the anachronistic picture of Socrates championing a modern secular, anti-clerical agenda committed to a reason-based foundation for ethics and ways of life.[15] This religious-philosophical Socrates is Kierkegaard's mentor. Both bequeath to us a philosophy that's persistently critical and lyrically religious as well.

It might seem astonishing to find Socrates in religion's camp, yet he belongs there. And it might seem astonishing to find Kierkegaard in philosophy's camp. Isn't he rather a literary figure – or too *religious* to be a philosopher? He makes a mark combating Hegelian temperaments, and sometimes seems to be, like Nietzsche, an anti-philosopher. But the obvious conclusion is that he's a philosopher because his mentor Socrates is. He's a new Socrates. He revives both dialogue and public polemic, a concern for soul, an ease with dialectic and lyric, and an ease with piety and politics. Kierkegaard is more philosophical than often supposed, and Socrates is more religious than often supposed. Could Socrates become Christian? If so, Kierkegaard could be fully philosophical and fully Christian. Both were called to their vocations by something extra-intellectual. That doesn't make Socrates

14 In *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard speaks of the deep "primitivity" of those passions that issue in convictions that make life more than a bland following of the crowd. Lacking such primal, passionate roots, we get the emptiness of "chatter." *A Literary Review*, trans. Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 66, p. 87f.

15 He is surely *not* a defender of "secular liberal discourse" and "self-realization."

a genius of rational pursuit who "unfortunately" was also religious; nor does it make Kierkegaard a dialectical and literary genius who "unfortunately" was also religious.

Love has both religious and philosophical overtones. Kierkegaard explores their interweaving in *Works of Love*. Socrates' love is neither Christian compassion nor charity nor love of neighbor, but it's love nonetheless: a care for others, for fundamental pursuits, for simple cordiality. The *love* of truth brings us to *pursue* it. Love's primal engagements signal depth of self and perception of a world worth welcoming. Kierkegaard praises the *Symposium*'s "indescribably wonderful presentation of the power of love to ennoble man."[16] As Rick Furtak reminds us in *Wisdom in Love*, both Kierkegaard and Plato trace "the moral and epistemological development of the self's emotional capacity for love."[17] Love centers Socrates's existence even as he rejects a misplaced grief (in the *Apology* as he sends the mourners packing). Love's vocal partner is song and poetry, and its more bodily companion is dance. Johannes de silentio reminds us that the movements of faith are dance, and Climacus identifies death as his dancing partner. Kierkegaard is known for his musical ear, and Socrates, too, shows a poetic ear for Diotima's speech, in response to which he delivers a lyrical speech in praise of love. Life is an *ascent* of love. Socrates loves the love that he describes and the Beauty that it seeks. He's wedded to a vision heard through an ear attuned to love, its diction, rhythms, and spirit, and passed on to us through speech akin to religious lyric.

Despite Plato's suspicion of all poets save himself (and Socrates), he prizes *philosophical* poetry, *religious* poetry. At the start of the *Phaedo*, Socrates reports a recurrent, perplexing dream. It says "Socrates, cultivate the arts," or perhaps "make music and compose."[18] We might say, "Socrates, be poetic!" A religious festival delays his execution, giving time for him to meditate on his life's completion. He takes that dream to mean he should make hymns in honor of the god whose festival delays his death. He sets lines from Aesop. His life is rounded out not only through his exemplary composure and tentative sketch-proofs of immortality but in making music, pious poetry. The aesthetic and the religious work hand in hand, as they later will for Kierkegaard in his beautiful religious discourses. Indeed, the choreography of words is not the only poetry Kierkegaard finds in Socrates. In *Postscript*, we have quite a startling image. Socrates is "*a solo dancer in honor of the divine.*"[19]

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16 *JP*, 3.2387. Kierkegaard is wary (as are many others) of an apparent growing abstraction as one ascends toward "the form" of Beauty. Yet one does not stop living when one glimpses Beauty which must mean that one lives with particular persons, as Socrates surely lives with the particular persons gathered at the Symposium table. Diotima says, "Only in the court of beauty is human life worth living" (211D), which seems to bring Beauty down to mingle with particular lives.

17 Rick A.Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, pp. 102-3.

18 *Phaedo*, 60e-61b.

19 *CUP*, 89. I thank Paul Muench for this reference. He connects artistry, philosophy, and dance in his dissertation, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Task," University of Pittsburgh, p. 124.

George Pattison avers, against conventional interpretations of Kierkegaard, that poetry can have a religious register. Notwithstanding standard views of Kierkegaard's position on "aesthetics" and "poetic living," poetry may communicate meaning at a more exalted plane than what is unambiguously and emphatically pre-religious, pre-ethical, a matter of Romantic sentiment, or frivolous or dangerous sensuous distraction. As Pattison puts it:

> . . . poetic form cannot of itself exclude the possibility of heartfelt meaning that would be well-pleasing to God. So the possibility is left open that poetic words, words such as those of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, may also be works of love . . . in the cause of healing broken hearts, soothing troubled spirits, and opening new horizons of hope.[20]

Not only poetry can be religious. The typically hard-edge contrast between Socratic Eros and Christian agape, so often insisted upon by Kierkegaard, can be softened too. For listeners properly attuned, Socratic love can work as metaphor, intimating a Christian religious love.

Philosophy, Religion, Ceremonies of Personhood

Socrates' profession of ignorance saves him from forcing a truth directly on others as obligatory doctrine, and thus shifts responsibility for working out the meaning of a life to the person whose life is at stake. His reticence has a moral aim akin to Kierkegaard's revocation of his work at the end of the *Postscript*. Socrates' convictions regarding a life of inquiry, justice, and care for the soul serve a wide moral interest. They're a recognizable part of a philosophical package. But they're religious, as well. For one thing, they seem to float, like religious convictions, on a kind of faith, relatively free of intellectualist vindication. His devotion to inquiry is explicitly grounded in pious recognition of an oracle's authority, and his assertion, in the *Apology*, that one should never do injustice and always obey one's superiors goes largely undefended. These seem to be truths to take on faith, or on *belief in the figure who holds them*, his *witness* to their truth. Socrates' extraordinary confidence and courage seem self-grounding in the way religious convictions are. The Socratic stance might even be called mildly prophetic. He *renounces* fame, fortune, worldly power and pleasure, even though he may not denounce them. He admonishes souls around him, cedes authority to his god (or *daimon*) and shows uncanny indifference to death, a religious serenity, ministering to Athens even as she martyrs him.

A religious import attaches to the most familiar part of Socratic life. Dialogue is struggle, but also a vehicle of spirit, which can make it sacramental. It can be crucially transformative, a renewing ceremony of personhood. Turning over convictions and commitments in the solitude of inwardness and in dialogical communion, under the aegis of ideals, can be a sacred practice. I call these exercises ceremonies of personhood, for they're integral in realizing our estate as interpretative beings – beings working up or preparing to receive a sense of self or soul from materials and plans bequeathed. Socrates receives instruction in love through Diotima. He takes it

20 George Pattison, "Representing Love: From Poetry to Martyrdom or Language and Transcendence in Kierkegaard's Works of Love," *Kierkegaardania*, 22, 2002, p. 153.

to heart, living it subjectively, subject to it. And part of living it is letting love, and 'his' love, get passed on to us, widening its transformative resonance through the ceremonial contact of dialogue. Words from Kierkegaard's *Discourses, Fear and Trembling*, or *Works of Love* play their part in such Socratic and Kierkegaardian ceremonies of transformation. They're occasions for renewals that are philosophical and religious.

Working dialogically with and against the grain of our convictions is the very opposite of adopting slogans picked up randomly, mimetically, by rote, or uncritically. Kierkegaard puts this aspect of Socratic dialogue at the very center of a Christian life. A Socratic devotion to ceremonies of personhood poses no threat to Christian existence, and a Christian devotion to care for the poor poses no threat to Socratic existence.[21] A Socratic devotion to bringing persons to birth might even be a precondition to a Christian birth.[22] Such devotion to dialogue also carries an implicit affirmation of finitude, of humility in matters of knowledge and comportment. That we're ignorant and need each other is a sentiment equally Christian and Socratic. How could a Christian *not* accept Kierkegaardian-Socratic ministrations? In *Postscript*, university routines are under Socratic scrutiny, and in *Practice in Christianity*, cultural Christendom is scrutinized. In *Concept of Irony*, we find Socratic intervention in Romantic ways of life, and in *A Literary Review*, a stinging critique of "the crowd" and the press. The last pages of *Fear and Trembling* evoke Socrates as a model of composure before death. Perhaps ideally, Christian life is virtually *always* open to beneficent Socratic interventions.[23]

Christian-Pagan, Pagan-Christian

Is Collaborative Identity Possible?

To bring Socrates to the center of a Christian identity seems to violate the fundamental intuition that you can be Christian or pagan but not both. Kierkegaard may "wear a Socratic hat," but when the chips are down, his Christian identity must be uppermost. A true Christian has to make Gospel revelation absolutely fundamental, so, at most, Kierkegaard can be Socratic as a boost toward being more Christian. Yet Kierkegaard clearly *resists* this line of thought. He never directly avows that

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21 George Pattison sees a unifying aim of the authorship as a Socratic pursuit of love, and that the *Discourse* and pseudonymous literatures are in (Socratic) dialogue on this theme. Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, Theology*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

22 See Chapter Two, note 22. In *Works of Love*, ed. and trans, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, as Marcia Robinson reminds me, Kierkegaard argues that in loving another one brings to birth the neighbor's capacity to be open to God, to be in loving receptivity toward God.

23 Pattison makes a persuasive case for the inescapability of Socrates even in the fullest Christianity that Kierkegaard conceives. See *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, Chesham: Acumen, 2005, final chapter. David Possen argues that "going further than Socrates" is an impossibility on Kierkegaardian grounds. See "*Søren* Kierkegaard and the Very Idea of Advance Beyond Socrates," Dissertation, University of Chicago, forthcoming 2007.

Socrates is diminished in the light of Christ, that Christian religion is an *advance* on the Socratic, that Socratic religiousness is only a preparation for Gospel events, or that a Socratic identity is *subordinate* to a Christian one.

Christianity may be historically dependent on its pagan inheritance. That doesn't make it normatively superior. Even in *Postscript*, Christian and Socratic religiousness are not put in a zero-sum game, the gain to one automatically a loss to the other. In *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard declares, unfazed, that Socrates has become Christian, but Socrates isn't pictured *renouncing* or otherwise *abandoning* pagan piety. Kierkegaard says his vocation has always been Socratic, not that this vocation is trumped or weakened by his Christian calling. Climacus doesn't present pagan religion as a *threat* to Christianity, nor Christianity as a threat to *Socrates*, so we lack a feel for the *existential* stake*s* at issue.

The stakes for *doctrine*, *theory*, or *theology* in the shift from Socratic to Christian piety may be evident, but their viscerally experienced correlates are weak at best. We have no evocation of what a Trinitarian theology (for example) would add to (or take from) Socrates' self-conception *as lived out* were he to be transported to the streets of Copenhagen. To grade their comparative merits, Climacus must grasp Socrates and Christ individually, and trust that the yardstick measuring their individual performance is fitting and his readings accurate. This smacks of comic hubris all around. The supposition is that Climacus takes their measure as if he's clocking them in a forty-yard dash. More soberly, let's return to Dostoevsky's scenario. Varying it slightly, we can imagine Christ and Socrates face to face. Would Christ downgrade or condescend to Socrates, or Socrates downgrade or condescend to Christ? Climacus, our professorial anti-professor, may tilt toward dialectical rankings, but then he's out to humor us, isn't he?

How can Kierkegaard assume a dual identity? How can Socrates and Christ inhabit the same city with equal authority? You might picture Socrates entering his local temple. Placing him in a Lutheran church jars our sensibilities. We hear him offering different prayers to his temple gods, speaking Greek, not Danish. Curiously, we're not similarly jarred – but should be – by the idea of a prayer transported to Copenhagen that was first uttered in Aramaic centuries ago in Palestine among a dozen threatened Jews in a "safe house" in a land under occupation. In Copenhagen, the prayer is uttered in Danish under ornate Lutheran cathedral ceilings flanked by neo-classical sculpture. The congregation joining in is under no *Roman* threat, under no threat at all from foreign occupiers.

Of course, historians and theologians – and preachers in their wake – will place pagans and Christians in quite different camps, and rightly so. But persons are much more than their socially or historically indexed identities. The descriptors establishing those cultural identities can distract us from exploring ethical, spiritual, or existential identities that escape such frameworks. It may be irrelevant to me, legitimately so, that Christ knew no Danish, and that Socrates knew neither Danish nor Saint Paul. Straight-laced historical-cultural accounts can miss *the heart* of a Socrates or Christ. The identity that Socrates' accusers ascribe to him is incomplete, and the identity that his friends ascribe to him is also incomplete. The Socrates of A.E. Taylor is not the Socrates of Foucault. The Socrates of Aristophanes is not the Socrates of

Nietzsche. The Socrates of Kierkegaard is yet another, an Athenian revived in garb fit for Copenhagen, and fit to have become a Christian.

Socrates is fluid, shaped by the knowledge and valuations of all and any who work to picture him. He shifts as he crosses decades, centuries, continents, and cultures, as succeeding generations find ever-new openings to fix (and unfix) aspects of the narratives of his becoming. Christ's Jerusalem identity doesn't exclude him from entering Notre Dame de Paris, and Socrates' Athenian identity doesn't exclude him from entering the streets of Copenhagen or Our Lady Church. Kierkegaard can weave a collaborative identity, each root of which is found in ancient texts and subsequent cultural interpretations of them. What stands out strikingly is that as Kierkegaard weaves Socrates into Christian membership, he doesn't find such transformative weaving *problematic*.

He gives entire books to the tension between an ethical and an aesthetic way of life, because these two identities, in his view, and at a certain level, *can't* be interwoven, and *shouldn't* be.[24] In *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way* we have a good thousand pages given to tensions in the *sense of life* among the aesthetical, ethical, and religious ways of life. Kierkegaard's attention to *that* contrast is extensive. His attention to the experiential tenor of the contrast between Socratic and Christian attunements is scant indeed.

From the perspective of the ethical, the aesthetical is clearly a failure, and from the perspective of the aesthete, the ethical seems wanting. Yet Kierkegaard demurs from any parallel when it comes to the Socratic and the Christian. From the perspective of the Christian, the Socratic is not a failure. From the perspective of the Socratic, however, although cultural Christendom may be a failure, the ideal of a Christian way of life is not attacked. By design, Kierkegaard holds back resources we might conjure for tracing the felt-quality of a Christian as *opposed* to a Socratic way of life because he denies there's any necessary friction, or fractious *incompatibility*, there.

There are abstract differences between sin and guilt, the absurd and the paradox, the immanent and the transcendent, but Kierkegaard is interested in how these differences get *lived out*. How does the life of "guilt-consciousness" differ appreciably from the life of "sin-consciousness"? How is a life subject to the first lived differently from one subject to the second? *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness Unto Death* present conceptual frames for grasping these contrasting perspectives on wrongdoing, but only at a level of dialectical abstraction. We have little *felt-basis* for declaring that sin-consciousness, for example, is a *more worthy* timber of moral personality than guilt-consciousness, or that living under the banner of immanence is *less worthy* than living under transcendence.

Kierkegaard steers clear of the conclusion that, as religiousness A gets ratcheted toward religiousness B, Socrates recedes. As his name suggests, Climacus defends (and is) a *ladder*, one rung above the next. He'd have us climb from idle speculation

24 Kierkegaard lets an existential artistry or aesthetic permeate the ethical and religious ways of life. Grasping the latitude that he accords such artistry requires that we eliminate a more commonplace understanding of an aesthetic existence that is defined precisely in *opposition* to the ethical or religious. See Marcia Robinson, "Kierkegaard's Conception of Poetic Living: Aesthetic Unity and Religious-Ethical Life," forthcoming.

up to ethical religiousness and on up the rungs to Christian piety. But why assume that Kierkegaard *himself* accepts this model of a climbing, which, after all, sounds suspiciously Hegelian? Perhaps we don't step up *above* the Socratic. Perhaps we let the Socratic and the Christian dance, a fluid, collaborative pair. Perhaps both Socrates and Christ dwell within the heart of Kierkegaard – who becomes a "solo dancer in honor of the divine," or a "Simon Stylites, Solo Dancer and Private Individual" (one of Kierkegaard's unused pseudonyms). Yet again, a Socratic exterior might hide a Christian interior – and vice versa. We already have the image from *Fear and Trembling* of a "knight of faith" who looks for all the world like a simple tax-collector.[25] Why not have a Christian-Pagan who looks for all the world like Kierkegaard?

Incomparable Worth

Calls and Commitments

Perhaps Socratic and Christian commitments do not represent *alternative and contesting paths*. Yet we might still cling to the idea that between compatible and congruent paths, one or the other must be *primary*. Let's look at the passage we've mentioned where Kierkegaard takes up the matter of ranking most explicitly. His conclusion will be that neither path is primary because we have no measure that could determine the primary from the secondary. He thinks of himself as inescapably Socratic and inescapably Christian and that there's *no yardstick* by which to measure comparative indispensability.

In the posthumous *Point of View* we read: "I for my part tranquilly adhere to Socrates. It is true, he was not a Christian; that I know, and yet I am thoroughly convinced that he has become one."[26] This is followed by a brief but decisive sentence:

> Qualitatively two altogether different magnitudes are involved here, but formally I can very well call Socrates my teacher – whereas I believed and believe in only one, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Magnitudes are the sorts of things that can be measured roughly quantitatively along a single scale. A feather is lighter than a stone. If two magnitudes are "qualitatively altogether different," then two qualitatively different scales are in use, and the scales are incommensurable. A feather is light and a mood is heavy, but a feather isn't

25 See Hannay, *FT*, pp. 68-9, and my *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp. 50-52. We have Socrates enter Copenhagen, and both Socrates and Christ in Copenhagen, but neglect having Christ enter Athens on the sly. On another front, we should consider that Socrates might not appreciate being inducted into Christianity. In his decision to induct, Kierkegaard gives himself great latitude in thinking that Socrates would want to become a Christian.

26 *The Point of View for My Work As an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 41; see also Hongs' trans., p. 54, discussed by Michael Strawser in *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 242.

lighter or heavier than a mood. So it might be that Christ is an indispensable figure in Kierkegaard's life, and that Socrates is, too. Yet the separate scales on which their indispensability is calibrated can't be measured against each other. Christ is "heavier" than Caesar and Socrates is "heavier" than Crito, but we lack any means to know how Socrates weighs in against Christ. *Postscript* is just kidding if it has religiousness B weigh in "heavier" than A.

Kierkegaard adds that " . . . formally I can very well call Socrates my teacher – whereas I believed and believe in only one, the Lord Jesus Christ." Kierkegaard might mean that *belief in Christ* is quite different from *taking someone (Socrates) as a teacher*. The qualitative measure for *belief in a God or God-Man* is different from the qualitative measure for calling someone one's teacher. A teacher isn't worshipped as divinity and a God is not my mentor. In and around the streets of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard's Socratic vocation might prevail, while in and around a place of prayer, his Christian calling might prevail. There could be no felt-need – and no practical way – to assign to either one a power or privilege over the other.

Let me say as a parenthetical but important aside that it's surely permissible to quietly *believe* that Christ brought a brighter light than Socrates. But you'd get nowhere, if I'm right, in bringing this intimate tilt of the heart forward as a proposition for consideration in the public square. It could not be a matter of *reasoned judgment*, or an entrant in the forum of contesting dialogue. If it took residence as a *quiet tilt of the heart*, it would fall well *within* the range of Socratic ignorance. That is, it wouldn't be anything one had impersonal knowledge about. Perhaps in prayer or witness one might attest to this inclination, and such a tilt might be powerfully indispensable to one's life. But, as we've seen, Kierkegaard has no hope that such a tilt could be a matter for public claim or contestation.

If his two figures work well together "at the level of the street" as opposed to the level of dialectical or creedal differences, then Kierkegaard might well find it difficult to get a *visceral feel* of the contrasting stakes between embracing Socrates (his teacher) and Christ (whom he believes in). Their "qualitatively different magnitudes" make a *judgment* of comparative worth impossible, and an *experiential account* of their collaboration elusive.[27] But perhaps we don't *need* an elaborate account of how these vocations work in tandem. When a dance couple moves gracefully together, the separate vectors of their expression merge: where there was dialectically a contrastive *two*, we have an experientially seamless *one*. In all likelihood, this unity won't be a matter of following rules or protocols. A pair *lives into* its seamlessness, each melting into the other. Neither needs to have or show subordination to the other. Each defers willingly, as needed. "Qualitatively different magnitudes" interweave as different aspects of greatness, grace, speed, or agility in the smooth enactments of their dual, yet single, identity.

The seamlessness of Kierkegaard's Christian-Socratic duet is evidenced by his giving Socrates a "come as you are" invitation to his inaugural dance. There's nothing he has to abandon or acquire in personality, character, or spirit to become a *bona*

27 The passage on "qualitative differences" ties in to the claim from *Philosophical Crumbs* that within the wonder of Christian faith, "everything is structured Socratically." See *Fragments*, pp. 10, 55.

fide Christian. It's *in virtue* of his untainted religiousness that Socrates is inducted gracefully and effortlessly. Jacob Howland notices something that might ease the transition. Socrates is without sin: there's no gap, in his case, between *knowledge* of the good and *doing* good. He has no rebellious will.[28] Further, as we've seen, there's no renunciation of *old* ways (or beliefs), and no acceptance of a *new* creed or testament.[29] Kierkegaard wants to live a seamless Christian-Socratic existence, a desire strengthened by his conviction that Socrates has become Christian. How could this happen?

Socrates Becomes Christian

Altering the Past

Kierkegaard admits that Socrates was not a Christian. The citizens of Copenhagen are not Christian because, as we've seen, no mortal gets over the bar. Of his contemporaries, Kierkegaard would say that the *task ahead* is to become Christian. In the instance of Socrates, however, Socrates has no task ahead. Kierkegaard signals that he *has become* a Christian – no further or future struggles required. Socrates moves into this status on *Kierkegaard's* initiative. He confers a *postmortem* status on his mentor.

Having taken hemlock, flesh-and-blood Socrates does not face the possibility of *becoming* anything. He has no point of view and no future he can own or answer for. Yet Kierkegaard can declare that Socrates *has become* a Christian, *avant la lettre*, as it were, not unlike our declaring that Hamlet *has become* a postmodernist, making him "one of us." This says nothing about Hamlet *trying to become* a postmodernist. Kierkegaard dubs Socrates "Christian," and the ceremony can succeed, as it might in dubbing Hamlet "postmodernist," or Don Quixote a Kierkegaardian "knight of faith."

Transformative ceremonies (like "dubbing") can be embedded in legal convention. A judge can declare from his bench that a couple is henceforth married. Given proper background conditions, his *saying* they're married *makes* them married. Likewise, my *saying* "I'll do it!" *makes* me committed – changes my status from uncommitted to committed. Now if a critic of great repute and authority *says* Hamlet is postmodern, that likewise may *make* him postmodern henceforth (at least as long as the repute and authority of the speaker – and perhaps his followers – hold up). In each case, the "mere utterance of words" can change reality by *making something true* through the saying. *The past can be changed this way*. Going back to a judge who *makes* a marriage, consider the case of his declaring that a pattern of living together is a "common law marriage." He might do this in a legal proceeding on the death of one of the pair. They can be declared *to have been married* for well nigh a decade. Here

28 In *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 213, Jacob Howland discusses Socrates' exemption from sin. Unfortunately, I came on this exceptionally thorough study too late to make extensive use of it.

29 Note that Kierkegaard says that Socrates becomes a *Christian*, not that he becomes Christ. So Socrates and Christ are still distinguishable individuals.

a departed spouse will be dubbed a "partner in marriage," be "married" *in absentia*. Likewise, Socrates might be dubbed "Christian" *in absentia*.

Ceremonies have powers of retrospective reconfiguration. The judge invokes these powers as he changes the couples' past from one status to a very different one. Before his declaration, the pair shared a life but were unmarried. After his declaration, their previously unmarried years become married years by virtue of a declaration that a common law so binds them. Kierkegaard has no *legal* convention to invoke, but he might invoke an analogous power in dubbing Socrates a Christian. He might write as a critic of high repute and authority, one whose judgment we trust. Sometimes we're immediately *taken* by a transforming critical assessment – say, that Hamlet is postmodern – though we can't say what power is operative, other than the authority or standing of some especially persuasive critic who *effects* this startling transformation – through a *witnessing*, an *attestation*, as it were, that "rings a bell" with us.

Stanley Cavell contrasts the work of performative utterance in a quasi-legal setting – a linguistic act that calls on *the order of law* or a law-like convention – with the work of what he calls *passionate* utterance. Writers can transform selves and cities not only through appeal to convention and law but, as he puts it, through "*an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire*."[30] What can this mean?

Setting aside the intricate development Cavell gives to this contrast, we can adopt his formulation by thinking of "passionate words" as *witnessing declarations* meant to "improvise" in the "disorders of desire" of their recipient – that is, meant to effect change of self or city. One can imagine many lists of such declarations launched to change another, but here's one:

"No man is an Island . . . "
"We hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."
"the readiness is all . . . "
"Let it be!"
"Language is the house of being . . ."
"the unexamined life is not . . . "
"I have a dream . . . "

The power of these arcing words (from Hamlet, Heidegger, or elsewhere) is analogous to the power of aesthetic judgments – the power an especially insightful critic might wield, for example.

As Kant saw it, in making an aesthetic judgment, a critic addresses an individual's refined sensibility or subjectivity. Her "passionate words" invite a responsive affirmation and rearticulation *from* the individual addressed. I hear Hamlet's "Let it be!" or Donne's "No man is an Island" and am moved to my own "repetitions" of these words in utterance of my own. Delivered amongst other listeners, that string of words can broaden its hold and echo in an ever-widening community. In this way, words with apt expressive power expand from a relatively solitary provenance

30 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 185. I thank Tyler Roberts for discussion of Cavell's views here in his "Criticism as a Conduct of Gratitude: Stanley Cavell and Radical Theology," forthcoming.

– uttered from the heart by Hamlet or John Donne or my neighbor – to encompass a potentially universal, compendious "we." They become part of what Hegel would call "objective spirit," even as they retain their full subjective force. The larger, potentially universal community envisioned is one of invitation, not coercion. And as successive relaunchings of relatively familiar Donne or Shakespeare words take place, new life is given to them, and with new life, new meaning tied to the conditions of utterance and reception. So searching genealogically for the power of such words, we may come across surprising shifts in tenor.

Passionate utterance is broadly performative, making a claim for recognition and circulation that, in its very utterance, can change the world. But unlike utterances in legal settings, say, or in settings where I promise something to you, passionate utterance does not work, in the first instance, by invoking structures of rationality or settled morality or institutions like the law. Passionate utterance can change the world, but it does so by invoking the shifting shapes of passion and desire, of imagination and sensibility – by invoking the mobile responsiveness of what Kierkegaard would call our subjectivity. It gains or loses hold within a world as it's taken in or passed over by particular responders, one by one. Arcing words in passionate utterance lift us – or they leave us indifferent. They live or die as we receive or refuse them. As Cavell has it, they're "an *invitation* to *improvisation* in the *disorders* of desire." Invitations don't bind in the way promises do. Nor (obviously) is their claim on us the claim of bald statements of fact or theory. Yet they promise new life, new configurations of desire, new shapes to passionate life.

The passionate speech by which Kierkegaard inducts Socrates into Christianity is a deed that invites a transformation of history provided only that the ceremonial or passionate invocation of an improvising sensibility is acknowledged by some telling number of a community; in this case, a community of readers. *That's no small order!* Kierkegaard finds Socrates fully worthy of the honor, and does the honors, confiding that he cannot but believe that "Socrates has become Christian." If his induction gains recognition, then, at a word, all parties are changed: Socrates, readers, Kierkegaard, texts, traditions. This posthumous election reconfigures the past and the present. The Christian tradition becomes more Socratic than it was, and Socrates becomes more Christian than he was.

Take another instance of "simple words," passionate utterance, effecting retrospective change. Disturbed by my evasions, a friend calls me to account with stinging words, saying, more or less, "*to thine own self be true.*" If the accusation hits home, it reaches back to reconfigure my past. I acknowledge I am one who has *not* been true to himself; I am newly stained, as it were. My past now speaks as self-betrayal, though it spoke honorably a minute ago. My past and, with it, my very person becomes altered in my letting in of those "simple" words. In admitting falsehood I become less false to myself – *truer* to myself, more transparent. Born to a flaw, I'm born to a better self. I now say, "I have become *other than I was*; now *truer than I was*." The disorder of my desires has been successfully infiltrated and transformed.

Reading Kierkegaard (or poetry, or scripture – "*simple words*"!) in this way can alter the persons we are and would become. That makes reading become a passionate, sacramental exercise as words encountered are vehicles of powers other

than oneself, as words of passionate power become renewing and transforming. To read is to be infused by spirit. Like instances of promising or legal declaration, simple Kierkegaardian words (not unlike my friend's "to thine own self be true") can jolt us toward a better self. And if we read, "*Socrates has become a Christian*," this "passionate utterance" can jolt, and then reach back with great force to realign a narrative of past and present.[31] These words can relocate my own position, perhaps letting the philosophic and religious antagonists within my becoming – my apparently opposed interrogating and compassionate sides – be less at war. Words can do that. It can become true that "*Socrates has become other than he was – he's become a Christian.*" We can attest to that. We can witness to that witness, and perhaps be changed by that!

You might be reluctant to buy this picture of how Socrates vaults from Athens on to would-be Christian Copenhagen. You might think this transportation is the fantasy of Captain Kirk beaming Spock out of Athens. Or you might think the idea smacks of the tarnished practice of baptizing long dead ancestors, or untold millions from non-Christian lands – without consultation. (They might be happy where they are.) Kierkegaard's bringing Socrates into a Christian circle certainly has no legal standing (though it has precedent: early Christian sects brought their favorite pagans into the fold through baptism *in absentia*). Yet is Kierkegaard's historical reconfiguration really worlds apart from our more familiar and recurrent historical revisions? Perhaps Jefferson now looks worse and FDR looks better, Hamlet now looks postmodern and Thoreau looks ecological, Sophocles looks like Freud, Christ now looks less than theological, Socrates now looks more religious, and Kierkegaard becomes Socrates. Through this cycling of simple words, the world is changed. We bring our "mighty dead" into the present to become contemporaries.

Whatever assessment we make of his success in reviving or resurrecting Socrates, it's clear that Kierkegaard has a powerful desire. He wants Socrates' life to continue – through relocation to a nominally Christian Copenhagen camp. A Christian Socrates would boost the prospects of the collaborative identity he seeks. It would provide a beacon for the trajectory *his* life might assume. His effort might fail utterly, but even then it would display the noble *wish* to have Socrates alive at the Christian center. By right and merit, he might say, Socrates *belongs* there.

Refusing Knowledge and Doctrine

Doctrinal Knowledge

Conviction can turn to doctrine, and doctrine to dogma, which in Kierkegaard's idiom is a turn from subjectivity toward objectivity. Kierkegaard's Socratic piety, we might guess, would put a brake on Christian conviction if and when it congealed too rigidly in frozen doctrine that freezes us. If the congealing was well along, he'd work to bring back fluid heat.

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31 One is reminded here of Heidegger's remark that Hegel was the most radical of the Greeks; or of the subtitle of a book by Dennis Schmidt, on *Germans and other Greeks*: *Tragedy and The Ethical Life*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Socratic ignorance would show up in Kierkegaard's distrust of abstract claims about an unknowable purportedly metaphysical side to things. Skeptical reserve would have its analogue in Christian humility and in Pietistic suspicion of elaborate theological disquisition. A Christian Socrates would be wary of ornately scripted ritual, repeatable by rote. Socratic polemic against Athens has its analogue in Augustine's polemic against the earthly city. Kierkegaard has a comfort both Socrates and Christ display in engaging 'ordinary' people face-to-face. All three refuse to bend when they offend those in power. They are rebuked, and are martyred for their convictions. On these fronts, a tandem Christian-Socratic identity unfolds seamlessly.

Still, Christians have doctrines of sin, incarnation, resurrection, immortality, Hell, mercy, Virgin Birth, the Trinity, Creation, and more. How does Socrates handle these? Well, we might give him latitude to abstain, given the evident *disadvantage* of his local and initially Athenian position. Were he to reappear in Copenhagen under a Kierkegaardian cloak, his skeptical reserve might release him from an *obligation* to take a stand on such matters.[32]

From Kierkegaard's perspective, a healthy Socratic abstention on doctrine would be balanced by a vigorous *questioning* of cultural Christendom. This would be major in a Socratic-Christian contribution. Sidestepping doctrinal debates and wrangles would be good all around, freeing energy for dialogue whose ceremonies of personhood signal even sacramental worth.[33] Despite doctrinal reserve, Socrates is not *existentially* a skeptic on how to live and what example one should set. That would be *another* part of a Socratic-Christian contribution. Socrates is content with poverty, humble, dedicated to public service. He brings the city under judgment and dies a political and a religious martyr, facing death with religious courage and serenity. He heeds religious counsel, whether from Delphi, his *daimon*, or Diotima. He pursues higher things, value higher than fame, riches, power, or pleasure. Kierkegaard accepts Socrates as a mentor in his battle to show that Christianity is not scholarly knowledge, not priestly edicts, not revelation used to gavel questioning to silence; not rote adherence to creeds, authorities, or routines.

From Kierkegaard's Socratic point of view, Christianity can't rely on theoretical props, as if there could be a firmer foundation for love than love itself, or a firmer foundation for faith and trust than faith and trust themselves. Not all religious-philosophical work needs to pursue intellectual vindications. Some explorations aim for illumination, for a showing (in a saying), an explication rather than an explanation, aiming not at handy proofs but at animating the "thing itself," the love or trust or wonder or freedom, just as it boundlessly is. Philosophical-poetic-theological reflection can transfer or expand the very love (or wonder) at reflective

32 Richard Rorty isolates a primitive religious impulse worth preserving that bypasses any need to frame creedal doctrines or make substantive claims to knowledge. Being hopefully attuned in the face of the world's and our own suffering, simple or catastrophic, manifests such a legitimate religious impulse. See N.H. Smith, "Rorty on Religion and Hope," *Inquiry*, 48(1), February 2005.

33 Kierkegaard seldom scrutinizes the bare content of creedal positions, say on Incarnation, or on Atonement, or Immortality. By and large, he's far more interested in how one lives these Christianly day to day, in the existential grip of virtues, moods, and passions; and in their failure to grip, in which event they strand us.

issue. George Pattison suggests that Kierkegaard's aim is *evocation* of his love of God. That's a different task than the familiar one of defending a love of God, shoring up its rational or cognitive credentials.[34] Where proof-attempts are bound to fail, vivid *expressions of possibility* carry eloquent imaginative appeal. That's what we want and need.

Imaginative elaborations can carry attestation of one's moral-religious yearnings that, under critical pressure, begin to sound like claims to knowledge. To say what love is *like*, which will include its imaginative allure for me, is witness to my yearnings. Yet we can be tricked by a similarity to straightforward knowledge claims. "*I just KNOW I love him!*" she says ardently, knowingly, imagination aflame. And if we're cynical or have a tin ear, we ask, "Well, what's your evidence?" Yet in her locution she's not reporting knowledge of a state of affairs in her location. She's manifesting a faith and hope, a trust and yearning – *expressing* these aspects of her being, not saying something about her self, held at arm's distance.

The expressive locution, "*I just know I love him!*" – what Cavell would call a passionate utterance – is an *intensification* of yearning, hope and love, and a request that we hearers acknowledge that identification of *love*. Knowledge of the world can – and *must!* – infiltrate my sense of what I am and might be. I know (objectively) that my land was stolen. That *brute fact* colors the imaginatively elaborated yearnings and resentments at my core. But clearly I'm more than any brute fact. At the least, I'm *the way I respond* to – accommodate, resist, negotiate – brute fact. With what yearnings, mistrusts, hopes, despairs do I *express or deny* the fact that my land was stolen? To cross over and out of the terrain of impersonal knowledge and to enter the domain of what I passionately attest to is to enter the space of yearnings and passions and desires, of imagination and possibility. It's to enter domains of mistrusts and despairs, but also of wonder, love, and poetry – the poetry and love of the land that was once mine. Or the wonder and poetry of Diotima – things of surpassing worth. Socrates professed ignorance of many things, but of one thing he was convinced: "I am ignorant of all things," he says, "except the nature of love."

Goods Beyond Knowledge

Poetry and love name passionate, imaginative enterprises of inestimable worth that thrive despite their ever-shifting and tenuous links to stores of public knowledge. They spring from possibility and imagination, and mark points of *resistance to Cold Fact and Force*. Kierkegaard has his imagination's eye on Socrates and Christ, and at times on Quixote and Faust. Or Hamlet.

In listening to the great critic Harold Goddard, we might hear a description not only of Hamlet but of Socrates, even of Kierkegaard. As Goddard has it, Hamlet was made

34 Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 164.

> . . . for ultimate things: for wonder, for curiosity and the pursuit of truth, for love, for creation – but first of all for freedom, the condition of the other four. He was made, that is, for religion and philosophy, for love and art, for liberty to "grow into himself."[35]

Of course, this *telos* may be not only Hamlet's, but general. To be made for "religion and philosophy, for love and art, for liberty to 'grow into himself'" may be the prerogative of Kierkegaard or Socrates or humans *per se*.

Goddard calls these five passions – wonder, curiosity and the pursuit of truth, love, poetic or artistic creation, and freedom – "the elemental enemies of Force." By "Force," he means brute power, but he could also mean "brute Fact." To cross over to art, to liberty, or to wonder is to launch free from certified knowledge, doctrine, or theory. Poetry and love, philosophy and piety, are of surpassing worth *because* they resist settled "objective" knowledge. They resist the impulse to accord the maintenance and expansion of impersonal knowledge a dominant place in human aspiration. Against brute fact or force, we confide love or fear, hope or yearning (or we sink to a despair). As the poet of *The Book of Job* has it, wisdom (what we are and where we stand and what our possibilities might be) is delivered in song or suffering, in vision or dreams in the night.[36] This wisdom overwhelms us in the very poetry of song, vision, suffering, and dream, in a whirlwind's revelations. It attests to passions and attunements that found hopes and possibilities that one can't abandon, than which there's nothing deeper, that speak for themselves like love songs or laments.

A worthy life bears witness to what can be loved, praised, or hoped for, and, in its oppositions and resistances, it bears witness to the pain of loss, evil, or horror. Bearing witness is not a lawyerly defense nor is it claiming a sort of knowledge to be honored in the public arena. Testimony, as well as knowledge, can be contested, of course. We can challenge Socrates' confessions, his witness, his unflappable composure, his conviction that a good man is impervious to harm. But to challenge this is not to target knowledge, but a *man*, a *person*, *Socrates*. We have to hear his convictions as bespeaking a core of his being, not just as an endorsement of a claim he takes to be true. Altering the modality of delivery (from witness to knowledge-claim, say) alters the meaning of what's delivered.

Transposing *how* Socrates speaks, we change *what* he speaks. "A good man cannot be harmed," he says. If that's a report on the state of affairs in Athens, it's just false, and he's a fool. If the mode of delivery is instead what it should be, a *witness* to the state of a soul, then he *confides* (as it were) that his soul can't be hurt by attacks that normally would harm or hurt. That doesn't add to our store of public knowledge. It increases our admiration of the man who pledges that he won't be harmed – he will let no harm come to him. That witness increases the possibilities we envisage for ways of meeting hurt and death. In bearing witness Socrates exemplifies a way of being in the world that can rub off on others, that might change the life of one who sees and hears. Socrates adds to our common stock of hopes and trusts in possibility.

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35 Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol. I, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 333.

36 Job 4:12-14.

A Socratic witness to immortality, or to the immunity of the good soul from harm, can morph toward debatable claims, entering zones of contestation where interpretative differences abound. Likewise, apparent claims to knowledge can morph toward unadulterated witness. At times it can be quite obscure whether the words we hear ought to be heard as a particular soul making a factual claim or instead as an expression of hopes or possibility – or perhaps both simultaneously. Yet everything is not up for grabs or interpretation. Christ speaks for compassion – that's "beyond interpretation," it lies in uncontested light. Does he speak for a life after death, and what exactly does he mean by that? We might dispute in what register to hear this dusking promise. Once we think of it, it's clear he *can't* mean that there's a guaranteed *biological* life after death. That seems, once more, to lie in uncontested light. That there are zones of contestation attests to the fact that everything is not *equally* a matter of contestation *all the time*, and many things never are. There's dusk's obscurity and the clarity of noon.

There's a time and place for Socratic scrutiny. There's also a time and place for love and hope and yearning, or for outright anger or despair. Then and there the uninterrupted grip of scrutiny would have disastrous consequence. Socrates let himself be swept away by Diotima's words. To let one's loves or hopes fall under endless interrogation is to lose them. An excessively interrogating child, persistently asking why or whether she loves her cat, will come to love the sport of *examining*, *reasoning*, and *scrutinizing.* The warm rush of love-of-cat will sadly get eclipsed. Socrates reveals that he could "not name a time when I was not in love." *That* immersion was essential to his vocation as a teacher and was beyond scrutiny. Existence, Kierkegaard might say, calls us to its dance – not just to looking in on it, and not just to staring at some slice of it with concentrated analytic brow. To dance can mean yielding to love or awe or horror, with scrutiny unplugged. Socrates is a solo dancer, honoring divinity.[37] Or, as the *Phaedo* has it, he can "make music and compose."[38]

Loves, Convictions, and the Person

Socrates loves his city and won't flee its sentence. His friends ask him to scrutinize, explicate, justify, and he complies, at first.[39] The city has been a parent to him, raising him, and has earned his gratitude. Flight would be ungrateful. Should he now defend the analogy? Is it impermissible to flee parents when they turn *bad*? Well, should he now say why *anything* is due to one's parents? Or why anything is ever owed *anyone*? Should he explain why one should care about these very *questions* – *any* of them?

At some point, those who've joined this colloquy will concede that some cares make up the rich expression of *who he is*, and at that point they'd see that it's both futile and destructive to push further. How can it be reasonable to ask Socrates to suspend (place under scrutiny) the identity-constituting cares that form the basis of

37 See *CUP*, p. 89.

38 *Phaedo*, 60e.

39 *Crito*.

any judgment that he might make? At some point, attacking the utterance attacks the utterer. Socrates *is* his loves of city and parents, his yearnings for justice and candor, his love for his students and friends. He needn't dig deeper for a *ground* of these loves, and we needn't either – and shouldn't, not if we love Socrates. To unseat or suspend those loves and yearnings is to suspend or unseat the person.

Socratic scrutiny is a helpful tool, often of great use, sometimes a danger, but never self-justifying. It can't give us a rule for when to yield to passions that are *other* than a passion for scrutiny, nor for when to continue (or to suspend) a scrutiny in progress, nor for when to take up that passion once again some time after we've put it down. A passion for skeptical questioning can encourage the false supposition that, without a rule for saying *when* enough is enough, there's no reason ever to stop. But love is not a rule, and love can be reason enough to lay off. Friendship, sleep, or startling blizzards can also be sufficient reason. All worthy activities and undergoings have their time and place, and the activity of skeptical scrutiny should be no exception. At times it should yield to the smile of a child or a song in the night. Critique Unbound looks less like reason's freedom than like dogmatic *logomania*. And a boundless passion for questioning all too easily feeds on – and feeds – a contempt for those less inquisitorially inclined. *They* feel no need to account for their failure to always take a second look – and *we're really sure they're less for it*! *They* don't feel pressed to defend a suspension of critique! But no one needs special release from the duty to scrutinize. There *is* no such standing duty.[40] (And from a hedonic perspective, the lapse of critique can't *always* be unhappy.)

Kierkegaard exerts Socratic pressure against *stasis* and any presumed transparency of life even as he grapples with the fluid meanings that enter, or fail to enter, a life, a conversation, a love affair, a city. And he struggles to come to terms with a gamut of witness and attestation, poetry, song and silence, seeking a happy confluence that would give tenor and fabric to a life. How should he respond to Socrates? How should he respond to Socrates' response to Diotima? How should he respond to Socrates' response to Alcibiades? What weight should he put on Socrates' capacity to stare down those soldiers stalking him?[41] Can a Kierkegaardian response to these Socratic responses muster toward a flowing Socratic-Christian life – toward a life Kierkegaard can take to heart as his own?

Expressive attestation can cool towards creeds, requiring a Socrates, then, to ask how, where, and whether they still ring with any vital meaning. A Socratic impulse refuses to allow doctrine to be sequestered as inviolable dogma. To accept this Socratic lack of closure, creedal and otherwise, is to find sufferable a continuing tension between alternative expressions, interpretations, and modulations of our cares – religious, philosophical, and otherwise. This openness to incompleteness is an acceptance of finitude. Needless to say, a Socratic doubt about one's own grasp

40 See my "Acknowledgment, Suffering, and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," *Soundings*, Fall, 2005, where, in Cavell's phrase, one can, in love, "keep one's eyes happily shut." The theme of necessary trust that exceeds "rational warrant" appears not only in the work of Cavell, but also in Hilary Putnam, Bernard Williams, and Alphonso Lingis, among others.

41 *Symposium*, 221b.

of faith is entirely within a Kierkegaardian spirit. One accepts that anguished phase of life (far more than a passing phase, in fact) where doubts about the movements of the soul still surface. [42]

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In the last years of his writing Kierkegaard was fiercely against Christendom and the Church. He went so far as to reject its deathbed ministrations. It's likely that in his student years his faith was in danger. But these qualifications aside, we can say, with a brave face, that he was always Christian (despite his protestations). It might still be true, as I've argued here, that he was also *always Socratic*, and lived out a collaborative identity. Kierkegaard's views on love, death, or faith, on wonder, life or art contain admixtures of the Socratic and the Christian, of the uncertain and the affirmed, of the compassionate and the critical, the portions to be weighed, acknowledged and embraced, case by case, with attention to the texts and to the dance of their words through mobile shared existence.

42 Kierkegaard writes for those who are, if only nominally, already Christian, and so has no stake in making converts. And if he embodies a fusion of the Socratic and the Christian, Kierkegaard will be, in some minimal sense, a pluralist. He'll have an ear for more than a single religious way of life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transforming Subjectivities: Lost Intimacy, Words on the Fly

the 'having' of a self is being
the other to one's self,
calling upon it with the words of others.
– Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*

Camus's figure in *The Stranger*, known only as Meursault, fills in an anonymous, stripped-down space lacking the sort of intimate contact with others on which mutual human intelligibility is grounded. He lives out a death of God but, as importantly, a death of care for others, and so appears estranged from them (as others are estranged from him) and is a stranger to himself. Along several vectors of a modern life, lost intimacy comes to seem the painful condition that post-Enlightenment individuals and societies struggle to negotiate, by whatever means.

Kierkegaard's central question is the classical one: what kind of life is best, is worthy of our aspiration? And it has a modern twist: what kind of life *can I believe in*? These questions might arise in any age, but in ours, they can seem especially pressing, even hallmarks of modernity. Without God, you might think, the world and our lives would be desolate. Nietzsche says that God is dead, and that this fact makes the very earth spin wildly off-center, disorienting all sense of virtue and importance. Without labor of some inherent worth, we seem driven into mechanical, impersonal ruts, where, as Marx has it, anti-human economies strip wage earners of intimate contact with rhythms of work, with products one can prize, with others with whom there might be solidarity. This lost intimacy Schiller calls "disenchantment," while Weber laments the depersonalization that large-scale "rationalized" institutions install as they overrun the intimacy of small-scale face-to-face communities.[1]

Kierkegaard frames the pervasive estrangement of modernity as a traumatic loss of subjectivity or inwardness, a loss of contact with oneself, a deep despair that is perhaps not even experienced as such (we put a brave or childlike face on things). Think of Thoreau's observation that the citizens of Concord follow lives of quiet desperation, a despair they might not actually *feel*, as it haunts just beneath the bustle of the everyday. The task for Kierkegaard, then, is to awaken a sense of this spiritual

1 In "Science as a Vocation" (1918), Max Weber writes, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'" This last phrase he acknowledges as Schiller's in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 155.

lack, to awaken our despair of – and *in* – a condition that's largely unacknowledged. Words, dialogue, polemics, can do that, preparing for the *recovery* of lost time and intimacy. Or short of that, they can work to ease the sting, once sensed – work to make that loss at least *sufferable*.

Elusive Intimacy

Losing Contact

Enlightenment critiques of tradition, state, and Church set out to clear the fields of false authority, but they can seem to threaten contact with life altogether. Detachment from oppressive, deadening authorities can be exhilarating. But with new freedom comes anxiety. What will center or ground a life once those old ways crumple? You might cautiously step back to assume a stoic detachment and aloofness. You might just struggle at a loss, perhaps like Dostoevsky's rather perversely self-entangled *Underground Man*. You might throw yourself into politics or art, family life or a career with a desperate intensity, testing their vitality in a new post-Enlightenment spiritual and cultural climate that refuses to vindicate or authorize your volitional investments. Kierkegaard responds in a slightly different vein, and at a different level. With the crumbling of old authorities and a heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety, intimate connections must be funded by a primal passion, a fundamental inwardness or subjectivity, a sense that something *matters*, that there is life *one can believe in*. In the crisis of modernity, he summons Socrates to speak for passionate subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's pivotal terms, "subjectivity," "inwardness," "passion," should be stripped of their commonplace Cartesian associations. Descartes sets out an inner space to which we have direct and exclusive access, a kind of receptacle in which thoughts spin and are examined. My primal certainty is that I think. Subjectivity is a fundamental ontological "space," and "absolute" in the sense that it's not something that can be gained or lost, or that one can have in degrees, or that is grounded in something deeper. Kierkegaard's "subjectivity" is very different. He laments a *loss*, a *decline*, of "inwardness," or "passion." One can *lose* care for self and others by *degrees* (and regain it). It's connected less with isolated atomic thoughts up for rational scrutiny than with sustained care – for one's neighbor, one's world, one's God – and with one's sense that the time and place one finds oneself immersed in *matters*, and that one *matters to oneself*. For Kierkegaard, the privations of the modern world signal subjectivity at risk. Cartesian subjectivity is closely tied to the *epistemological certainty* that *I think*, while Kierkegaardian subjectivity is closely tied to the *moral conviction* (and "objective uncertainty") that I care for, or am summoned or struck by, something that *calls* on my care, that gives me something to *care* for, that claims me, or demands something of me. It's a sense of an attenuated, punctuated, passionate self or sensibility that might wax and wane, a passion that might run full tilt, eddy in contrariety, or dry toward a trickling death.

Inwardness, passion, or subjectivity, for Kierkegaard, characterize an aspect of being and acting in a world, a world already given (though always open to reinterpretation). It's a way of acting with and from the heart, with responsibility, with

passion or feeling. It has nothing to do with things "only I can know" sequestered in a Cartesian fortress. Although Kierkegaard does not address this issue directly (knowledge of other minds is not foremost on his agenda), he seems to assume that we can (and typically do) correctly gauge another's heartfelt dedication, cool aloofness, or naïve innocence. Coaches, teachers, and good parents have this familiar skill. A Cartesian framework makes another's "inner space" in principle "private-and-out-of-view," denying Kierkegaard (and others) access to another's heart. Yet it seems, doesn't it, that my heart will be awakened as I know yours, through your welcome smile, for instance? Now if, because of Cartesian restrictions, I cannot know your heart through your smile (say), then my heart will lie numb, unwarmed. Likewise, you will lie untouched by me. I will become cold to myself, as well.

Cartesian subjectivity defines a non-public *epistemological* space while Kierkegaard's defines a broadly *moral* space. One has more or less subjectivity as one has (or takes) more or less responsibility for one's life, or is more or less affectively and morally responsive to others and one's ideals, or is more or less subject to passions and the heart. Subjectivity for Kierkegaard is an openness to be affected by (subject to, responsive to) deeply moral, religious, and aesthetic pulls, initiatives, invitations, pleas, calls, demands.

Seen in this light, there's nothing obscure, incoherent, or dangerous in the idea that truth is subjectivity, for the maxim does not bear on claims to knowledge, and it presupposes no Cartesian inner space or suspect "private knowledge." It sets out *an aim of human living that recommends itself*, a proposal with great *appeal*. From an epistemological standpoint, it's natural to take subjectivity as a defect to be corrected, as when we say a journalist or judge is "too subjective." But Kierkegaardian subjectivity has little to do with cognitive projects or with reporting events or facts. A child pleads for my response, calls on my subjectivity, asks for my help or compassion. To be subjective is to be *subject to* those worthy passions, virtues, and attunements central to a worthy way of life – a way of life, say, responsive to the need of others. Unhappily, to be capable of subjectivity is also to be subject to getting those worthy passions, virtues, and attunements dreadfully wrong, or to be inept in manifesting them, or to be perverse, spitefully defying them.

I hear a child in distress. I make an accurate mental note: "9:32 a.m., a child's distressed voice is heard." That registers something objectively true to the facts. But if I do not in some way *respond* to the child's call, I'd be a moral or subjective failure. I'd have betrayed Kierkegaard's admonition that truth is subjectivity, that in affairs of the spirit truth is to be open, responsive, attentive, affectively attuned, ready for a call or summons. If I disregard that cry, I'll be caught in falsity – false to what I could and should be – despite having grasped the objective truth that a child cried in distress.

If the highest value one can aspire to is being morally responsive, then necessarily, truth (our highest value) is subjectivity. Though it needn't run counter to objectivity, it can. Getting my facts correct may not be better than responding as a human. In a famous passage, Climacus writes that it's better to pray truly to a false God than to pray falsely to a true one.[2] The analogue would be: better to respond truly, in and

2 *CUP*, p. 199.

from the heart, to a cry that turns out to be false, a false alarm, than, on hearing a true alarm, to take only cold objective notice. Knowing false from true alarm, false from true gods, is, of course, quite another matter. But Climacus' point doesn't rest on whether we can know true from false gods. Even if we had a sure-fire method of detecting a factual true from false in these matters of gods or cries of distress, there'd still be the matter of response. She who *knows* the true alarm has yet another task. She must muster true response. Subjectivity is our highest (though not our only) value.

To lose subjectivity or inwardness is to lose the sense that things matter, that something summons the heart. The prevailing mood veers toward nihilism, utter numbness or indifference, but short of that one might feel the intimate pain of absence. This resembles unrequited love. To restore lost subjectivity is to restore the sense that such loss need not be final or pervasive, that a heart can be scored or wounded but not dead. One might find that love can be requited, that a Whirlwind's voice can return a world (as in the *Book of Job*), that Isaac is not finally lost but will be returned. One might find that dialogue itself, even as it addresses lost love, or addresses the bleaker prospect of nihilism, can, *in that address to a listening, receptive subjectivity*, bespeak a fragile intimacy. We can thereby find ourselves reflected back to ourselves, restored as creatures of some worth, mattering to others and to ourselves, and find therein some swerve of subjectivity regained.[3]

A crucial moment in *The Concept of Anxiety* plays out a yearning for lost love (as we'll see in Chapter Six). There a young woman pines beyond the sea's horizon for her lost love, and we're reminded that the solitude of unrequited love is also the solitude of encounter with an absent other. In *Repetition*, a young man pines for *his* lost love, and awaits his Job-like thunderclap to restore his world. In *Fear and Trembling*, we hear the story of a young man and his princess, his love painfully forever out of reach. In that "dialectical lyric" we have a portrait of Copenhagen (it could be any 19th-century city) where a numbing self-loss is tied to the spectacular distractions of theme parks, markets, and the barrage of headline news. *Either/Or* and *Postscript* depict loss of intimate contact as one fails to "choose oneself" or to claim experience as one's own. To be "in touch" with oneself is linked to the Socratic admonition – to his "passionate utterance," as we might say – that one should know oneself.

You might wonder how one could *not* know oneself. But losing knowledge of oneself, or never having it, is as easy as losing subjectivity, or never having it. Clearly, self-knowledge is not knowledge of a fact or theory. To *know oneself* Socratically is not to know an object at arm's length. It's to know which experiences claim one, to be confident of one's intimacy with those claims, to pledge them as one's own, and have one's actions be faithful to that pledge. Self-knowledge, then, and wisdom, are not a species of propositional knowledge – knowing *these* truths to be self-evident or otherwise justified, laying them out as statements to be embraced. Self-knowledge becomes a species of what we've called "contact," tactile, or visceral knowledge,

3 For the role of intimate conversation in the constitution of a moral self, see my "What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One's Own," *Inquiry*, 45(3), 2002.

knowing our way with our experience, having trust in it, standing by it, pledging to live a certain way that springs from our deepest intuitions, our primal "feel" for ourselves and our commitments. When Socrates claims ignorance of everything but love, he's intimating that he's in visceral touch with a love of friends, a love of his city, and that in courage he pledges to stand by a love of inquiry and ideals, say of justice and the good. From this angle, self-knowledge is the capacity to stand for something, to have the courage to do so, even in ignorance of an "Enlightenment-approved" proof or justification of any ideals one's action and one's life might embody – the objectively elusive objects of one's trust and pledge.

We know that Socrates knows himself because he says he's loyal to Athens, pledges his loyalty, and is at ease, utterly unconflicted, in steadfastly *living out* that closeness to himself (as pledge). He's at one with himself, in contact and intimate with himself. He's oblivious to, or utterly free from, any temptation *not* to honor that pledge. His self *is* that pledge, and nothing is more solid than it. He pines for nothing, nor does he agonize over a bewildering array of options he *might* have followed out. He considers only what his pledge necessitates. He has the solidity of knowing, "Here I stand and can do no other" – without a trace of false bravado. The "necessities" his pledge entails are so much a part of who he is that they don't strike him as restrictive – any more than the biological necessities of breathing strike one as restrictive rather than pure delight. There's no sense of Socrates unsatisfied, only the marks of poise, composure, self-possession, freedom. He lives out the truth of (his) subjectivity.

In abiding by and living out that pledge he lives out a life that appeals through its marks of satisfaction, poise, composure, self-possession, freedom, courage, regard for truth and inquiry, regard for love and others. For Socrates to have self-knowledge is for Socrates to *be* Socrates, as that life unfolds toward death. Do we find this sort of intimacy with self and with subjectivity-satisfied, this sort of self-knowledge, in *Kierkegaard's* life and work? Perhaps it's in the poise and living pledge of his sermonic *Discourses* – their meditations and their prayers. Or perhaps it's in his polemics in the service of an ideal, or in his task of spelling through the authorship a truly vast, responsive, unknown reach of consciousness.

Salutary Words

The Call of a Phrase

Kierkegaard's writing energizes intimate contact between writer and reader. But how do "mere words," often from a deep past, come to enter or change our lives, if they do? From a particular site of utterance, they reach well beyond, with surprising transformative powers. "*The unexamined life is not worth living*" becomes an event whose radiating effect continues to span centuries, languages, and locales. To picture the strange powers of such writing, it helps to scale our attention down from the level of books to passages, or even sentences. We can then think of words as arcs of meaning. The Socratic utterance enters a life not as information transfer but as infusion of meaning. Socrates or Kierkegaard "come alive" in our experience of

their words. We come to live among their words, and so live among the dead, now no longer dead. How does this happen?

A word's edge, or the angle of a phrase, catches my attention, and bends it slightly out of shape. It might happen as I encounter sentences like these:

> The self receives itself. (*Either/Or*)
> History begins in the glance of an eye. (*The Concept of Anxiety*)
> Socrates becomes immortal the moment he hears the verdict. (*Fear and Trembling*)
> The artist aims to change the world – to change it into itself. (Rowan Williams[4])
> Truth is subjectivity. (*Postscript*)

These words still startle, triggering inescapable response. I find myself fated and alive before them, even as they strike me as quite other to myself.

Kierkegaard gives us words that move and dart and soothe, words that shape a forward world we could inhabit while also reaching back to shape a soul or self *prepared* for such upcoming inhabitation. He has a ministering aim, to ready listeners or readers in "finding their next and better selves." That's the way Cavell puts it in his account of Emerson. He gives an aphoristic stamp to this capacity of words to cultivate a self: ". . . the 'having' of a self is being the other to one's self, calling upon it with the words of others."[5] Words of others call us forward. Yet how does one become, as Cavell puts it, "*the other to one's self*"?

We have access to a cultural stock of experiments in self-cultivation. There are ancient cultural stocks (words that Socrates can loan us) that have matured through time. By taking them to heart, we give them new lease of life. Kierkegaard's immersion in Socratic words and themes represents a kind of ongoing retrospective maturation of those ancient themes and also a contemporary maturation of Kierkegaard's condition. In turn, Kierkegaardian explorations complete themselves, mature, as they become some other's – say, mine, or yours – to own.

Kierkegaard sets me back from self-preoccupations, whereupon I'm "other to myself," other to routines that have become myself. Those routines are now felt as a former, or inferior, self, a constriction that tacitly bars me from something better. This "something better" is my first intimation of a better self – though initially I will be hard pressed to say exactly what it will amount to.

Kierkegaard's account of Abraham administers a shock, shaking up my old assurances, unnerving a self that now seems pressed away, at one remove, an

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4 Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005, p. 18. I thank Tyler Roberts for this passage and quote.

5 Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 102f. He also writes, "I am *aware of my words as mine* as I abandon them, forego owning them." Words are alien as they make demands in the progress of a self, and then take on new poignancy as we abandon them to others, say as teachers abandon hard-won words to their students. Words launched from a stage can seem newly vibrant as they glide toward an audience. Emerson (as Cavell puts it) abandons the world to find it; in comedies of remarriage, one comes to know marriage in abandoning it. Abraham knows Isaac as he abandons him. See Chapter Eight.

instantly previous self, as it were. I'd rather have Abraham quietly in the wings, out of trouble, retired, resting, as a patriarch should. But taking his son to Moriah, knife at hand, is a jolt, an eruption that puts me in inescapable contact with Kierkegaard and Abraham, and simultaneously puts me inescapably beside myself, other to the normal routines that circumscribe my unawakened self. I scramble to make sense of things, but perhaps I'll have no access to a stable take on things. Whatever this Abraham amounts to in the long run, in the short run he destabilizes. I find myself, in Cavell's words, ". . . being the other to [my] self, calling upon it with the words of others." As Abraham was called by strange words, so I am called by words of an uncanny other.

Abraham is anything but a domesticated figure to routinely visit. Through Kierkegaard's accounts of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, I'm forced to confront the abyss he is, hence to suffer the loss of my placement with respect to him. This means I'm thrown by that loss to worry whether I really know what of myself remains. One can't pass by this religious horror easily. I'm called upon by words that are the world made strange.

The Life of Words

Words are not just objects that strike and stop us in our tracks, like a wrench in the machinery. The shock of Abraham may foul up the works, but it may also reconfigure the self, if only momentarily. Imagine words as actions arcing in mid-flight from a source on the way toward a reception, and then sent on, reanimated, for neighbors and future others. Such words might be bits of meaning in mid-flight, culminating not just in *impacts* but in giving impetus for temporally extended action, for transformations in the receptive self.

A batter lifts a ball toward center field. We might miss the moment of the swing, but catch its trajectory in mid-flight. Our attention splays toward its open destination (will the fielder get it, drop it, return it for a pick-off?) and splays backward toward the bat or batter who gave the ball its impetus (did he anticipate the pitch?). We read that arc in flight, take it, say, as lofted from an identifiable bat, now a soaring triumphant sphere headed for the stands.

The words that arc from Athens, "*the unexamined life is not worth living*," might arrive as a triumphant, soaring sentence. But then many arcs won't be so easy to decipher: "*parting is all we know of heaven.*"[6] This arc may require extensive interpretation. And in the case of this line from Dickinson, as well as the Socratic admonition, it remains to be seen how I might live their meaning into my proximate future. In any case, the moral of the arcing ball is this: words unfold as actions halfway between their shadowy provenance and their shadowy outcomes. To grasp the meaning of an arcing word in flight is to read its future and its past as best we can, however obscure its provenance or outcome. We are always interpreting creatures, and creatures of our interpretations.

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6 Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 630-31 (poem 1993).

Words approach us, in Cavell's words, as "other" to ourselves, yet we then address ourselves in these words, making them our own. I read a manifesto: words strike their intended blow, working on my sensibility and motives. I reel and then begin to sense future outcomes now quite uncertain. Say the pamphlet calls for justice, reaching back to an Old Testament passage, and then arcing forward to light fires (my spark added), changing the tone of decades ahead. I might find myself gripped, caught up, infiltrated by the power of those words, and as a fan can't resist reaching for a ball traveling her way, so I might be unable to resist joining the trajectory this manifesto inscribes – the ambit of action it demands, recalls, and foretells in the moment that it sounds.

Take words that sting, that place me other to myself, yet call on me with the other's words. My friend admonishes, "*To thine own self be true.*" My past then appears colored as a span of self-betrayal; my future is resonant with a call to change my ways. The source of power for these words might seem plain – my friend launches them with the *intention* that they sting. My friend speaks to *me*, and I read intention from his face. Yet a manifesto or a Socrates or a Kierkegaard can also launch an infiltrating sting that sets off self-reconfiguration. Yet *their* face is not before me, with an intention to be read. In any case, they couldn't know it's *me* that they address.

The words launched by my friend or by Socrates take on power from deep cultural roots. It's as if the words flow with an indigenous strength from an opaque, even mythic past. The words my friend utters are powered in part from a Shakespearean source, and in part from an even deeper source, for Shakespeare borrows "true self" from cultural strata much earlier than his own. So if I'm familiar with any of this deep provenance, my friend's stinging words will have reached back gathering a resonance, then rebounded to my present, and then called me forward to a future. Such words seem to carry transforming power *on their own*, as if my friend, or Shakespeare, were exploiting a collective power source quite apart from any particular transmitter's or receptor's awareness of their deepest provenance and power. We might think here of Heidegger saying that "language is the house of being."[7] But if it is, then it's a house whose power to shelter can remain well beyond our grasp, a house that shelters a kind of powerful cultural pre-consciousness.

Forces of a voice and word work seas of subjectivity unfolding in our temporality. This image of words arcing from a past invites me to look forward. A proximate outcome of my friend's sting might be an alteration in my approach to a mentor, sister, or employer. Or I might realize that these words demand I quit a worthless job – and let the chips fall. How they fall will impact other persons in a widening circle largely unknown to me. So some word impacts may be trivial while others are colossal. If these words, in my reception of them, mean I quit my job, then the man who sells me gas will have one less customer, and the son whose tuition I was to carry may have his aspirations crushed.

This image of the energy of words as they launch from a past and arc toward a future is meant to counteract the image of "mere words" or "only words" as emitted,

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7 Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 2nd edn, ed. David Krell, New York: Harper and Row, 1993, p. 217.

say, by a message machine whose synthesized voice recites, " – *to* – *thine* – *own* – *self* – . . ." So often we think of "mere words" as "mere," as dead in that way, and thus sadly lose the sense of their unimaginable power. A less figurative account of how such words effect change of self might be possible (though I can't provide it). But that words can have immense effect is hardly in doubt. On a dark street someone says, in effect, "Your money or your life!" The impact is as certain as a physical blow. When my friend says, "*To thine own self* . . . ," words likewise carry power, yet not in this case from a physical threat. We can acknowledge that words realign selves – and settle for ignorance, or a figurative sketch, when it comes time to say how.

My friend's words are not only "his," not his alone, but "the words of others" through which he calls on me. This confirms our lives as cultural creatures, at the disposal of language, who avail ourselves of words other to ourselves in becoming selves. As creatures of value, of soul, of spirit, perhaps we just *are* this openness to words other than ourselves, through which we become ourselves. Heidegger's *Dasein* has been newly translated as "*the-openness-we-are.*"[8] We are the very undergoing of this split between our present, soon to be former, self, and the self that speaks now to us as other, as stranger, as future, as neighbor.

Thoreau will speak (as Cavell hears him) of neighboring things and our next self.[9] Kierkegaard puts it aphoristically: "*the 'I' is oneself and one's neighbor at once.*"[10] In his evocative depictions, Kierkegaard unfolds words and worlds other to ourselves – worlds and sentences and words to make our own. Their figures impinge on us, arcing from an unknown past, as old as Faust or Socrates or Abraham. These words and worlds arc toward their present passing contact with us, from which they may (or may not) find new lease on life to form a future now unknown. What Cavell might call passionate words invite us to "improvise" a new, more vital mode of becoming. We're stricken, challenged, and with luck, changed toward increase.

In our routine and relatively thoughtless lives, we lose touch with the life of words. As we'd expect, if the life of the world is the life of our words, then a lost intimacy in life will be a lost intimacy with language. To find our lives and words requited might well be to rediscover the best of dialogue, of living speech or writing, of oratory, poetry, philosophy, or prayer. Yet such rediscovery cannot mean an outright voyage of discovery, claim, and conquest. As we'll see, instead, this would be to await the gift of repetition. It would mean patience at the site where such words might be returned to activate a self, registering both lost time and time requited.

Hermeneutics

There's a triple valence of interpretation here: words yearn for completion in a world-not-yet; trail back toward obscure receding sources; and spread lateral elaborations

8 Thomas Sheehan, "Reading Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?'," *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, I, 2001, p. 196.

9 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*, San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, p. 109, where he identifies the nextness of the self to itself as a condition of awakening.

10 Hannay, *Papers*, 37, II, A 131.

across the present. Kierkegaard's words might be disruptive, transforming, and unfinished in their effects like an *Augenblick*, the sort of glancing, meaning-laden look that sets the stage for reconfiguring a self. A reciprocal glance of recognition, a glance of love, can carry resonance that does the work of reconfiguration. In a twinkling of an eye, as in the drop of a word, present, past and future are made new.

The agency of words arcing toward and entering a present works reciprocally with the agency of interpretations that we spin out responsively as they enter. Living words *call* for interpretation, "connecting the dots" imaginatively. The triple valence of moving words is matched by a threefold interpretative response. We hear words or passages intimate an ever-departing future horizon of *completion* (I hear a call to arms), intimate an ever-receding initiating *source* (I hear a call continuous with Old Testament calls to justice), and intimate a *present* lateral elaboration (the thrill of solidarity sweeps through).

What begins as Kierkegaard's struggles to square accounts becomes part of our *own* struggles to square accounts. He passes on the infectious sting of argument and critique, of aphorisms and novellas, of images and thought experiments. This resembles what Cavell calls moral perfectionism – the self's unending struggle with becoming what it might be, with becoming a becoming it can own. Words sting us (or wake us gently) calling into question a routine, now former self, in the name of something better. For the moment, this questioning is the opening to settling our accounts. Kierkegaard's words take us on, calling us to be anew, to be as someone new.

Kierkegaard launches words polemically, as in his *Literary Review*, and then, at times, as a poet might, as in the lyric parts of *Fear and Trembling*. He sends on words with dialectical humor in *Concluding Unscholarly Postscript.* And his words seem close to prayer in his *Discourses*.

A passage born in writing is reciprocally born in being read or heard. It's born in the moment that it breaks a deadening drone to jolt and ignite a soul. Each launch invites interpretations along different registers of hearing. Each intimates an unfinished world as an adumbration (or refiguring) of *my* world, and intimates an unfinished source as an adumbration (or refiguring) of *my* source. Words get intercepted as I read, falling under my purview, yet not hedged thereby from becoming any others' just as well. My gain in self through words is no one's loss. We rise (or fall) together. As Melville has it, we have a joint-stock world, in all meridians.[11]

Widening Community

Kierkegaard's words can launch out as stinging critiques of his city, its cultural, political, and religious life. Polemic is a way in which words launch to shake a public and its institutions. It has a broader public to address. Kierkegaard appeals to me, but that appeal doesn't land on my doorstep only. It can be potentially universal, enacting continued couplings and communions on the way to wide community. It pulls in a community not of uniform belief or of explicit law, but of shared

11 *Moby Dick*, Chapter 13, final sentence.

interpretative responsiveness to the artistry of texts, perhaps like a community of symphony performers. It pulls in a group that embraces broad differences in texture and register of individual voice, but speaks communally, as well – and in dialogue and polyphony.

In Plato, powerful Socratic words are said to found a city. Biblical words are said to found a peaceable kingdom, a city among those of good faith. These words might arrive in a tender vein, as poetry, parable, or psalm. Or they might assume the combative, confrontational tones of prophecy or polemic. Of course, in subtle ways poetry can be as harsh as prophecy, and prophecy has its own poetic eloquence.

Poetry, polemic, and prophecy can work, through what Cavell calls "passionate utterance," on separate or congruent tracks, unsettling and settling time, evoking lost time, promised time – time requited now as present time we take as ours. Words work to settle and unsettle worlds we live through, breaking complacency and bringing us closer to communion. Speaking of the poet Wallace Stevens, Simon Critchley avers, "Words of the world are the life of the world, and poetry is the highest use of those words."[12] The worlds that Kierkegaard brings alive through words are surely worlds in motion and in time, time lost and time regained.

Offered with affective power, infused with subjectivity, words can shape an intimate communion that forms part of a communication that radiates outward, and aspires to realize a potentially universal community to come. If they ring true, the condition of the soul that Kierkegaard bares in writing begins to resemble a general condition. I gain access to a soul that was not mine but begins to become mine, that can belong as much to others as to Kierkegaard, as much to the present age as to another, as much to me as to him or to my neighbor. It's as if spirit lay in common trust, even as I avail myself of it as the particular and irreplaceable individual that I am.

Of course, community and communion can fail in the familiar ways. One's mood and mode of response can be askew. My inflections inflect the world I can receive. I can be unready for Van Gogh, and so fail to see his work, which is there for those with eyes to see. Complacency, selfishness, power, desire for fame or riches, dull imagination, lack of contact with the better world of words can deny salutary transformations. The bulk of words that cross our path hardly carry transformative powers, and the transformations offered can be illusory or violently destructive. Furthermore, words are not the only force in town. There's brute power to contend with. Our grip on a world is tenuous because of adversive power, because of our unreadiness *to* be gripped, and also because of the simple failure of the world to present something worthy of our grip.

An Abstract Academy

Kierkegaard and Socrates address us intimately as if giving private counsel, and also launch public polemics with their city and their age. Just as Plato adumbrates an unfinished struggle with his mentor, Socrates, and his city, Athens, so Kierkegaard

12 Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 10.

adumbrates an unfinished struggle with himself, with Socrates, and Copenhagen. His polemics targeted an irreligious state Church, a shallow academic style, a chattering press, a pattern of self-avoidance evident in the streets, amusement parks, or riding paths. Some have sought a source for these citywide distortions in the philosophy of the age, as if a kind of Hegelian plague had infected all sectors of the *polis*. But I doubt Kierkegaard would accord to any merely textbook point of view the power to shape the maladies of an age.

The murky point of view he satirizes is a symptom of a deeper malady, with philosophical Hegelianism just the tip of the iceberg. After all, it's unlikely that trading in Hegel for a Marx or Plato would change the culture, Church, or citizenry in radical ways, for it's life in Copenhagen that's off-key, not just a scholar's Hegel. Kierkegaard's critiques of the Church as entertainment and theater, his critique of an ever-expanding commercialism, of leisure time spent shopping and at theme parks, of strolling in order to "see-and-be-seen," and of a shallow sort of academic learning are indictments that are strangely contemporary, and that stand quite apart from the failings of the fashionable philosophy of his day.[13]

Academic writers, teachers, can fall into barren intellectuality and Kierkegaard found that tendency comical and distressing, another instance of estrangement or lost intimacy. The *Postscript* might be a broad critique of theology or philosophy, or a form of social "ideology critique," but it's also a critique of university education – not so much of teaching in the natural sciences or technical disciplines like law or medicine, as of teaching in what we'd call humanities: literature, fine art, philosophy, religion, parts of psychology and history.[14] He laments a loss of passion especially within precisely those fields meant to address a person's deepest needs.

Degrees in Dispassion

Professors can adopt detached, impersonal approaches to the matters that they teach. Perhaps they're stiff and impersonal, sticking to "the cold hard facts" of irregular verb forms or the periodic table. Of course, even when the point is mastering hard fact, we want professors to model love of truth or of discovery or of the small wonders of the discipline itself. Math or ancient languages encompass a set of skills and factual knowledge of practice and context, and yet can also be a love and calling. That gives them subjective weight. Socrates has an unapologetic love of inquiry. In philosophy or religion or literature we'll model love not just because we have affection for the discipline, but because love (amongst other affects and moods) will be an explicit theme to take up, turn over, and thus to better know. As one of many other ways of being in the world, love is something we'll want to bring to classroom life.

13 For a ground-breaking study of Kierkegaard's placement in, and critique of, patterns of urban modernity, see George Pattison, *"Poor Paris!" Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, and *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth-century Crisis of European Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

14 See my "Whatever Happened to Ordinary Subjectivity?," *The Spring Journal*, Spring 2007.

If not in genetics or geometry, then surely in consideration of religious or aesthetic or moral themes, we evoke and explore the panoply of affects, passions, sensibilities, and modes of response that are central to wisdom and foolishness, to responsibility and betrayal, to indifference and injustice, to righteous indignation, petty vindictiveness and deadly vengefulness, to surpassing gentleness. We take up grief or anger, halting tenderness or unwanted envy as these can establish or undermine self-knowledge, integrity, character, or composure, and spill out to shape communal life. This means conveying a raw-feel of affects and responses as they appear in texts intertwined in distinctive lives and pseudo-lives and deaths. Love of what goes on in the humanities is love of dance and song and viewing, and love of reading from those several and immensely varied texts (including the text-like forms of dance or music or painting) that convey a living presence of the arts of charity and affection, the passions of death and grief, the arts of conversation, gesture, and action that reveal ourselves to ourselves and others. This affection and attention is a far cry from transferring hard fact, method, or theory.[15]

To navigate a complex Kierkegaardian world is to gain intimacy with particulars of affect or passion, to ride with their particularities, to be swept along with wisdom or happiness, with outrage or serenity, with betrayal or deep envy. But it's also to be with the contours of possibility and hope, renewal and repair, and the contours of those forces that shut down hopes or celebrations, leading to despair. These texts are living repositories of human aspiration and desire, of hopes first raised, then dashed, of free imagination and imagination crushed, of tact and rough insensitivity, of tainted love, bounteous affection, and rash conceit.

Sites among the humanities open text-like worlds – worlds that Kierkegaard spins out, cities of words and notes and steps. We're asked to imagine felt contours of rising or descending life, of fluid grace or tempestuous disorder. Intimacy with how these are lived out is the opposite of abstraction, but *also* the opposite of fact or method. We imagine what it would be not just for an anonymous anyone to live them out, but for a friend or enemy – and for *oneself* – to live them, alone and in community. Imagination's muse awakens aspirations to know *more* of betrayal or grief or lust or vengeance, of the immense wonder of a world or of the discrete lines of a simple pageant. Stirring imagination from its accustomed ways can also evoke fears that *short-circuit* aspirations, inducing melancholy or worse. Yet we maintain

15 If *Hamlet*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, or Beethoven's *Opus 132* appear in the ambiance of my class, they'll carry a range of raw and subtle emotion, not just as an object of scrutiny, but as a felt-presence. To let grief or sweetness appear in the immediacy of its particular expression in *this* poetic line, *this* musical motif, *this* corner of a canvas is to let it come alive, echo in the room – insofar as it's evoked or conjured. If I convey not a whit of Hamlet's painfully, wondrously acute consciousness, then I can't teach him (though I can demand certain lines be memorized). Conveying some acquaintance means a little modeling in diction, pace of speech, apt metaphor, expressiveness of voice and face and hand. To convey intimacy with rage or envy or bitter disappointment will require that I recognize its transference, however slight, to members of the class. This means that I monitor the wax and wane of the receptivity of auditors to what's at stake. I'll respond to their response or failure to respond, and encourage dialogical elaboration of such felt-meanings as now echo in the room.

trust that something like intimate dialogue can *restore* trust and value, can light up contours of a better life.

Cavell hears texts at first speak words *other* to ourselves – yet *in their otherness*, call us to our next step. They display what he calls perfectionism, a theme to which we'll return in Chapter Ten. Reading and being read by texts is the venture of moral aspiration forever beckoning, of paths of realization never fully realized, of a sense we're never done. We're *undone* by powerful texts, happily or otherwise. They call us to a more complete delight in those close by, in the world close by, or in the sea's horizon. And more painfully, they call us to better recognition of sufferers near and at great distance.

Formal disquisitions neglect the possibility of listening for a next and better self. Those sitting in quiet rows might welcome being stirred by intimations of who they are and might yet become, in action and public service, in sensibility and insight, in love or even in aloof detachment. Narrowly "neutral" academic address is infinitely un-Socratic. Of course, Kierkegaard also misses a Socratic alertness in the varied goings-on outside the university. Church, shop, daily paper, amusement park, theater, museum, city hall – each conspires to neglect matters of the heart. It's not just a Copenhagen problem, either, for it's just as prevalent in Paris or Berlin.

As Plato saw, the city is a portrait of the soul (and its loss), and a loss of soul has its counterparts in a diminished city. In its own way, the university is, for Kierkegaard (and for us), Plato's city of words.[16] We might even hold, against the evidence of guile, money, and guns that "*words of the world are the life of the world*."[17] The *life of the world* should flourish precisely within the pale of the academy, but sadly it turns out to be a site at risk where soul ever slips away.

Fashionable Hegelianism

As Kierkegaard saw it, part of what distracted academics in the humanities from the intimate life of words and texts was the seductions of fashion. To be *in fashion* is to be praised not on merit but *due to* fashion. Kierkegaard parodied a fashionable Hegelianism in his time, and present-day scholars sort out what he found wrong in Hegel and his Danish followers.[18] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* mocks not just Hegel, however, but those who *teach* him – and not *only* because it's Hegel that they teach. The important point for Kierkegaard was that Hegel was *in vogue*, and *amending* him was fashionable. His real target was the prevalence of fashion.

To detail Kierkegaard's objections to Hegelians helps to place him in his times. But Kierkegaard would object to *any* fashionable style, Hegelian or otherwise. He means to speak to *any* place and time, not just the fashions of his times. It's lamentable that culture mavens flock to *Hegel* (not to Aristotle, or Socrates, say). But more to the point it's absurd to *flock* – for what's *à la mode*, *avant-garde*, *politically correct*. It's

16 In the *Republic*, Socrates promises "to build a city of words," a city in speech or dialogue.

17 Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, p. 10.

18 Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

sad and comical that professors hold views for their crowd appeal, even when that "crowd" is diminished in size to a clique or specialized elite. And it's absurd that they drum up business to *create* a crowd, to publicize, to get a *following*.

Socrates made large-scale philosophical claims: that the good man could not be harmed, that wisdom was a kind of ignorance, that he was not impious (as his city charged), that he knew something of love. But he avoided pushing doctrines that might get fashionable, and he put fashionable things on trial. His aim was not to mimic ideas in circulation, or market them, or distribute them as slogans on the streets with a wink to a few friends "in the know." The Socratic aim, which Kierkegaard took up, was nudging persons, one by one, toward their better selves.

In modern universities, professing suffers lack of subtle witness, testimony, confession, intimate revelation or provocation. We can fail to intimate what in texts or lines of poetry or prose or melody moves *us* – is *moving*, period. Needless to say, that's not to advocate rant – moralistic, religious, political, or otherwise. It's to invite into one's pedagogy a willingness to allow those others so briefly in our charge a well-timed glimpse of whatever sensibilities we may have won from texts, but also won from what we call experience. Institutions tend to sideline sites of intimate or passional encounter – encounter, say, with Hamlet's doubts or Mozart's grace. Yet textual sites of passion, affect, undergoing and resolve veritably beg to tender their very doubts or graces, out and on to others. To do so would be to honor the venerable aim of spreading seeds of affect, insight, wisdom, eloquence as these arise in texts. A stock figure of ridicule from Kierkegaard's *Postscript* stands this venerable aim on its head. The bright Assistant Professor distributes vocabulary tests on Plato, dashing any hope to stir a soul.[19]

Excess Learning

The prevalence of fashion, abstraction, and neglect of the life of words and texts failed to eviscerate Kierkegaard's learning. He attended lectures, studied hard, and took careful notes. All the while, he let a Socratic lightness divest him of too much seriousness. We get clever *mimics* of academic texts – *Fragments*, *Postscript*, and *Concept of Anxiety.* (They're not only that.) He acquired thorough university training, as we'd expect for someone of his talents residing in a university town. He followed in the shadow of his imposing elder brother, Peter, who had made his mark as a disputatious scholar. Pursuing his degrees brought Kierkegaard to Socrates, to Greek and Latin as well as to Kant and Hegel, and to Mozart and Shakespeare. But just as actors must get beyond dependence on a script, so scripted university learning must at last be set aside.

Kierkegaard wrote a dissertation on Socrates and irony. Yet Socrates is deeper than any script, even one laced with irony. He asks, "*Well, what do you mean by X?*"

19 Kierkegaard's university teacher, friend, and mentor Sibbern suggested that he pursue an academic career, yet he must have known first-hand that university settings can compromise Socratic aims. His great gifts for dialectic and academic swordplay could become a moral liability: his intellectual gifts would bring notoriety among students, among the city's fashionable intellectual set, and among professors, all too entranced by flashy intellects.

But at last he'll put that script away (and Kierkegaard will too). He lets Diotima interrogate *him*, which was no part of *his* scripted moves. His lively concentration in telling of his encounter with her surpasses any simple scripted learning. In being moved by *Plato's* evocation of *Socrates'* evocation of *Diotima's* evocation we move progressively away from scripts. These layered evocations open us to move and sound with spirit on our own, responsive to words "not our own," as Cavell would say.[20] Diotima and Socrates can become our inspiration, but their muse sings as scripts are left behind.

Kierkegaard certainly had the training and talent to be an extraordinary professor. However, his Socratic vocation led him first to *remove* the scripts of abstract, impersonal knowledge. The university stayed well *outside* his career aspirations and squarely *within* his gadfly sights. If he had taken up a university career, clipped his wings a bit, he might have found a way to keep the Socratic muse alive. That would have meant developing a Socratic way of teaching texts, approaching Plato or Jacobi, Hume or Kant or Herder with due "ignorance" in proper skeptical reserve and humor – not taking them didactically.[21]

At the end of *Postscript*, Climacus lightly passes off his accomplishment as something to withdraw (we come back to this in Chapter Twelve). Without such revocation, *Postscript* itself might stand as excess learning.[22] Kierkegaard's irony is subtle enough that he can mimic professorial address while remaining serious in his underlying critique. *Postscript* is a sharp "defense" of subjectivity, passion, and responsibility while precisely avoiding slippage into being *too* scholarly or academic. It "defends" a field of subjectivity (and other themes) by letting realities speak, by evoking them, not by excessive *explications*, *disquisitions*, or *justifications.* Letting such realities speak means readying affects and sensibilities for passionate response. But, in writing as he does, the risk is real: can he criticize excessive intellectuality while *avoiding* excessive intellectuality?

Back From Theory

Philosophy attends to self-examination, to care for the soul, as Plato said, which includes our ways of being with others and in the world. Foucault and Hadot revive this ancient aim, though the dominant contemporary practice keeps philosophy aligned to arguments – Leibniz's for monads, Hume's for free will, Kant's for

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20 See the opening formula in *SUD* for a relational self that's grounded in another – a model discussed at length in "Music of the Spheres," the final chapter of my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

21 Socrates is known for his intellectual wit and penetration; Climacus calls him "a solo *dancer* in honor of the divine" (*CUP*, p. 89); Johannes de silentio's knight of faith is also a dancer. The idea of nimbleness, grace, and bodied presence in the world is important here. Nietzsche said he could only believe in a dancing God.

22 Some take *Postscript* to have failed because it becomes too "academic" or "professorial" in its address – too "objective," as Johannes Climacus would put it. We return to this charge in Chapter Twelve. Kierkegaard can mimic professorial address. *Postscript* is a "defense" of subjectivity, passion, and responsibility that never slips, in my view, into being *too* academic. Kierkegaard criticizes excessive intellectuality while avoiding it.

reason's limits, Rawls's for justice. Absorbed in the intricacies of demonstration, one might fall from wisdom, neglecting the soul's interest in intimate contact with the world and others, and the intelligibility such contact yields. Yet it's a *philosophical* concern to know the feel and allure of shared or lonely life, the sufferings of untold sorts of injustice and hurt, the delight of a recuperative good. Programs in literature can also drift toward theory and abstraction, neglecting the felt-quality of passions and sensibilities that wed us to a life, and span a range from outrage to envy to measured compassion.

In embracing critique but resisting theory, and returning us to an intimate self-knowledge, Kierkegaard resembles no one so much as Socrates, which should place him first among philosophers. He exposes untruths, stands firmly honest, and, despite the risks, stays with a willingness to listen and engage *without* powerful doctrines or metaphysics to cling to. A Socratic Kierkegaard eludes an academic niche because he concentrates on addressing individuals, one by one, responding to their specific existential need. He's unimpressed by knowledge fit for one and all, fodder for the chattering class, riffs for café banter. One thinks of Wittgenstein's refusal of theory and his love of the subtle differences and textures that are the death of generalities.

Knowledge that bears on "care for the self" would resemble what Clifford Geertz calls local knowledge. We might call this "tactile" or "visceral" wisdom, exemplified in a rock climber's feel for the sound and texture of a granite wall, or the unexpected visceral and fleshly knowledge Jacob has in wrestling his God, the knowledge Thoreau has of his Concord paths and ponds, or the sort of pain and joy and resonance with the life one knows in giving birth. Like Plato in the *Symposium*, Kierkegaard thought that any knowledge worth its salt gave birth – to new ways of response, new configurations of a soul. One seeks knowing contact with one's attunements and convictions and their imprint on the world, a contact that redeems itself in a quick readiness for the next step or grip or moment in one's impending future.[23] Such knowledge resists propositional formulation (hence Socratic ignorance is its ally), yet it gives bracing intimacy of the sort one has in "knowing one's way about" – or fearfully, joyfully "knowing what one undergoes," in a challenge or a moment of renewal.

There can be tangible certitude here even as one is at a loss to say what exactly it is one knows or undergoes. What is it that a surgeon knows – beyond technique – that gets her through a mid-operative crisis? An extended wilderness trek in autumn snows can bring one into contact with a quite different reality, bring one to glorious immersion in one's surround, such that, as one philosopher put it, "I knew myself to have been instructed for life." And yet this writer, a Harvard professor from the

23 Some philosophers search for non-local, detached knowledge modeled on the impersonal knowledge achieved by the natural sciences. But Kierkegaard's philosophical hopes lay less in line with Descartes, Spinoza, or Kant, who tried to make way for science against the weight of a social or personal world, than with Socrates, who takes philosophy to address matters of living, of living well, of truly living – or to consist in "knowing what one undergoes," fearfully, joyfully, as one understands a challenge or a moment of renewal.

1950s, can frankly add that he "was at a loss to say what instruction I had received."[24] Later in his reflective journal, he writes, in keeping with our theme, "No intimacy, no revelation."[25]

Abstraction blocks immersion in the local and tactile, and it also darkens existential moral questions that emerge when urgency descends in the anxiety of the unexpected. Someone caught in existential throes needs a response that meets the texture of her perplexity or pain, not talk that floats from generalities or principles far above the conditions of felt-need. Otherwise, she feels dismissed, overlooked, and hangs helpless in her moral plight.[26] To be subjectively responsive means keying to the local specificities of affect, sensibility, and moral particularities in one's situation.

Moral Impact

Well after dark, I hear a knock, a panhandler at my door. Deny or answer this intrusion? Real as this quandary is, it doesn't yield to expertise or theory. My moral personality or character is in question. Will I be (am I) stingy, prudent, generous? Am I (will I be) fearful, outraged, composed? The distillate of my academically acquired facts and methods can't rescue me. I'm in the lurch, coping as I can.[27]

It's not as if a Socrates would have a formulaic *answer* to my quandary, but he'd understand the issue as of existential, urgent moment. He'd adopt what Kierkegaard calls subjective thinking attuned to my situation in its specificity as it bears on what I am – my passions, character, responsibilities. He's a midwife, bringing whomever he encounters toward birth, assisting them to negotiate crisis with its potential transformations. He'd offer a midwife's help in bringing out what I *see before me* (or should see), where my *convictions* lie (or should), what *demands* they make (or should). That would accentuate my moral perceptions, self-knowledge, responsiveness and courage. It's not detached instruction but what I've called tactile wisdom.[28]

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24 Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999, p. 140f.

25 Ibid., p.130. This is the connection between love and knowledge that Kierkegaard affirms in his entry "to love and to know are essentially synonymous." Hannay, *Papers*, 48, IX, A 438.

26 I can't resist a reference to Amitai Etzioni's account of a cruel mishandling by others of his grief on the death of his son, reported in a *New York Times* Op-Ed, October 7, 2006. He cites movingly the inept insensitivity of a rabbi, a philosopher friend, and a teacher, all of whom should have known better, each of whom tried to hijack his grief in the name of a theory of *how* one should mourn, and how a better theology would make God seem less cruel, and so relieve his grief.

27 Compare the strange dilemma patients face when expertise breaks down: in marvelous detail, doctors present three ways of treating an aggressive cancer, admit they have no clue which course is "correct," and throw the decision back on a bewildered patient.

28 In *SUD*, trans. Hannay, p. 61, Anti-Climacus puts it this way: "The law is . . . that every increase in understanding corresponds to a greater degree of self-understanding." The

In academic training, cultivation of one's moral person has no obvious place; it's not in the curriculum. From a Socratic stance, however, texts and dialogue can lay out a path for growth of character, or transformation of the self. The case of the shadowy visitor could be offered as a narrative of moral crisis to explore. I'd share it. That would break the rule that scholarly study should be kept sequestered from the rough and tumble of personal life, including moral life.[29] If the Socratic spirit slips into class or corridors, it's through telling stories like the one just narrated, timed to converge with texts that evoke apt parallels in Socrates or Kierkegaard or Melville.

Bureaucratic Training Displacing a Passion for Texts

Discipline-specific theory is not constructed to address local, existential need. It targets an anonymous, "no-one-in-particular" and aspires to speak from nowhere, for "any rational mind." Kierkegaard makes the intimacy of his address explicit, as when he greets, not just any rational mind, but "my dear reader." His Socratic address bespeaks care for the soul, preparation for death, refusal to do evil, and, when necessary, readiness to put one's friends and city on trial. Such an exemplary address and dialogue is in turn political, moral, and religious. Unfortunately, a university's compartmentalized disciplines and valorization of a detached and largely "objective" research stance darken the hope that a Socratic, Kierkegaardian ideal might inhabit the give-and-take of university conversation.

Kierkegaard's polemic against gross neglect of existential matters in the university and outside it becomes more urgent as huge technological and market forces push a Socratic presence even further from the university. Here's a startling announcement that sounds a death-knell for the humanistic ideals of cultivating moral, aesthetic, and literary imagination. "*The University of Malta*," we read, "*is geared towards the infrastructural and industrial needs of the country so as to provide expertise in crucial fields*." This ringing call leaves humanities and the arts unfunded and forgotten. It restricts cognition to only its instrumental roles and drops imaginative variation or the inflection of lyrical perception. There is no vision of a university that nourishes sites for curates of past lives and souls, welcomed from this culture and the next, brought from the dead into presence for fleeting dialogue with *this* companion figure, with *this* striking line, *this* image, *this* chord sequence. It has no sense of classrooms as sites for curates of past choreography of steps, of a Socratic or Dostoevskean or Schubertian dance of affect and idea and powerful exchange. Nor does this mission statement honor sites for futures flowing in as dark or lifting winds apt for souls taking their next tremulous step into an unknown where questions are so much more than answers and even silence has its place. Nor is space saved for spirit to lift and fall with *this* Van Gogh crow, with *this* line from Rilke, with *this* Socratic exchange, Emersonian invocation, or Hepburn moment – no space for

rationale for seeking an increase in understanding is that it leads to self-understanding, not that it advances power.

29 See note 14, above.

this gasp of Lear's incomprehension, or Kierkegaard's plea for knowledge that will "*come alive in me*."[30]

A school of humanities has goals beyond theory and policy concerns. It can evoke the lineaments of character and the character of culture. Faculty can critique their traditions and curate what's most worthy there. Unfortunately, even humanistic fields are often subject to theory-driven interpretative regimes, styles of reading and delivery that aim only to unmask, demystify, and decode. This depersonalizes texts, their teaching and reception, and fuels a self-crippling distrust of affirmative cultural discourse.

Cultivating intimacy or affection in the humanities is cultivating subjectivity as openness to texts as they display the arts we prize, the arts of conversation and praise, of attentiveness and gratitude and compassion; the arts of grieving and outrage; the arts of seeing and coping with affliction, injustice, and estrangement. Under affirmative regalia, humanities can deliver to us these very arts we know through intimacy, contact, and dialogue, if we know them yet at all.[31] The worlds we then display will be not just fields of social forces or subliminal psychic drives, for we speak of and bespeak worlds of infinitely varied others who harbor full complements of affect, imagination and discernment, and who harbor contrasting styles of subtle expressiveness, of halting inexpressiveness, of unfortunate evasion, and even of violence.

Socratic Humanism

To attend the self means care for the textured, clothed, and mobile human I find myself to be, a creature subject to spirit, in pursuit of love, ever cognizant of deep dependencies. And it also means care for this textured other mobile human I find you to be, equally subject to aspiration, in pursuit of love and recognition, cognizant of dependencies, and thus, deep loyalties. Such care for self is a humanistic one with no necessary ties to Promethean self-sufficiency or a hubristic Apollonian rationality. It escapes aspersions placed by "anti-humanists" on an Enlightenment complex of excessively individualistic, hierarchical, and rationalistic presumptions.

The sort of Socratic humanism at issue does not privilege autonomy and reason at the expense of love or the gods, or of being rooted in that sort of community wherein complex identities are mutually negotiated, where one is immersed in the life of one's city and frankly dependent on it. One needs *faith* that one can teach or model character or moral personality – with far less than perfect confidence in the *grounds* of those convictions that obtrude decisively as yielding just the personality or character that one is. As Climacus would say, where things matter most, we operate with objective uncertainty. This unabashedly *moral* goal of education belongs front

30 Hannay, *Papers*, 1 Aug., 35, I, A75.

31 For an extended exercise in such affirmative critique, see, for example, Tyler Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

and center. Why abandon moral aspiration and refinement to an isolated so-called private sphere, where it fends for itself or languishes out of sight? [32]

Contact and Truths

In our earlier discussion of Socrates, we stressed his love of truth, of his city, and of friends gathered for drink and discussion. Before returning to this theme of deep affiliations, we might ask (again) why Socratic care begins so often not with healing words, say from Diotima, but in a disruptive vein that unsettles the person it engages? Well, love unsettles, too! Perhaps this brings us back to Cavell, who has words confront us as *other* to the self, arrive as a gadfly's *sting*. This disruptive phase of dialogue is preliminary and not an end in itself. Philosophy has its start in love and wonder, but, for these to root, swamps of error and illusion must be drained.

The contacts cherished by initiates of love or wonder or poetry cannot be attained through impersonal knowledge, or by following an abstract cognitive protocol. George Pattison writes, "Beyond the question of knowledge are poetry, madness, love – but if these are not and cannot be knowledge, they may yet be best of all."[33] If these may "yet be best of all," then we'll patiently attend their arrival, foregoing suspicions aimed to ambush or smoke them out. Meanwhile, we'll resist trying to restore objective securities where none exists, and get on with living buoyantly through the land of the insecure. We'll stay open to the touch of madness, love, or poetry, to the knowing flash of granite at our fingertips. Thoreau cries, "*Contact*! *Contact*! *Who* are we? *where* are we?"[34] Contact lies hand-in-glove with propositional *unknowing*. As Kierkegaard puts it, "The deep truth in Socratic ignorance [is] truly to *forsake* all prying knowledge."[35]

If subjectivity means responsiveness to religious, moral, and aesthetic demands that befall initiates of poetry, wonder, or love, then in responding we acknowledge what lies beyond vindicated public knowledge. We acknowledge demands or invitations responding to our deepest needs. Such acknowledgment faces opaque yet powerful springs of spiritual need and opaque yet powerful promises of answer *to* those needs. We acknowledge callings that map and power the trajectory of the soul.

Those who expected a gift of packaged knowledge from Socrates and Kierkegaard leave disappointed, yet to hands open to other than determinate knowledge or

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32 See Chapter Seven, where I lay out MacIntyre's models of moral inquiry, especially the style or model he calls "tradition." Within "tradition," a university clearly acknowledges a mission to refine and develop a moral sensibility in its students through inquiry.

33 George Pattison, *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London: SCM Press, 2001, p. 142.

34 See Henry David Thoreau, "—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! The actual world! the *common sense*! *Contact*! *Contact*! *Who* are we? *where* are we?," "Ktaadn" in *The Maine Woods*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1961, p. 93.

35 Kierkegaard clearly values knowledge of Greek and Copenhagen. It's prying for "transcendental" knowledge in the hope that it will answer our moral and religious needs that he, like Kant, forsakes. See Hannay, *Papers*, 46, VII, 1, A 186.

doctrine, something more is offered. Poetry and wonder have their own certitude or conviction to instill. If we are their initiates, and for a moment abjure fixation on objective protocols, then they grip us beyond doubt, they're there to be accepted or refused.

Eros and Certitude

Socrates has "the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved."[36] This is a knowledge of capability that Socrates confides as his own. It is a visceral, tactile knowledge of love that's unmistakable in and for one who is smitten – and one often knows, just as certainly, that another also is smitten. Socrates could "not name a time when I was not in love." That immersion in love is essential to his capacity to bring forth love and knowledge in others. This knowing is the sort one has in the friendly company of others who know – say, as one plays within an ensemble of musicians and knows things are going well. It would be a way of learning in the company of another, as the young man in the *Theages* who learns best by being able to see Socrates' eyes, sit beside him, touch him. Call it erotic knowing or knowing by contact. It's a thinker's knowledge, but also a dancer's, a singer's, or of someone with a painter's sight.

A climber can be instilled with perceptual certitude of contact as she lets her tactile love and wonder take hold, gazing on or inching up a massive granite face. Protocols of safety or technique are not abolished, but they're more or less invisible as love and wonder and the face itself make their own poetic and bodily demands. There's humility mixed with that certitude. The massive wall scales down our sense of self-importance. The vivid, inescapable sense of just *being there* in contact with this undeniable reality is humbling, too. It strikes us, but leaves us stammering if we try to back up its claims on us through general considerations.

The American philosopher Henry Bugbee, a teacher of Cavell, put it this way, as we've heard: "No intimacy, no revelation." He goes further with a quite extraordinary claim. "[Without] the intimacy of touch [nothing] is . . . truly '*known*'" [37] Bugbee is giving "knowledge-as-contact" full privilege. If we agree, we have to reconsider what Pattison so beautifully said: "If poetry, love, and madness are not and cannot be knowledge, they may yet be best of all." [38]

True knowing can in fact be linked with touch – being in touch with the flow of a poetic line, having the taste of blue cheese, touching the child's face as the blind or loving might, riding the flow of rapids, having Hamlet's lines close at heart – close to breath and to the fragility and power of voice. To make this link is to allow poetry and love and madness their full day as knowing. This reminds us, not that Pattison is mistaken, but that he speaks from our common supposition that knowledge is paradigmatically impersonal fact and theory. He's thinking of that sort of knowledge produced by research programs, produced by scholarly endeavor, reported back by trained technicians and observers in medicine or police work or

36 *Lysis*, 204b.

37 Bugbee, *Inward Morning*, p. 130.

38 Pattison, *Short Course*, p. 142.

field-biology. It's clear that for *that* sort of knowing, lapsing into poetry or love would make that knowing suspect, and perhaps signal its exit from the domains of knowledge altogether – at least from the sort of knowledge that rests on the protocols of disciplinary fields.

I've said Pattison is not mistaken, and by that I mean that when one's arena is the academic community, having in mind its moments of lapse and distraction, and especially as one speaks not for the natural sciences alone but for literature, philosophy, or religion, then the first step – *indeed!* – is to declare for "poetry, love, and madness," to bravely find them "best of all," to accentuate the gap between them and abstract and method-driven ways of university style knowledge-production. But one's arena is also the world of what Kierkegaard called existing. There we live in poetic touch with words or backyard gardens or slightly muddled great uncles or unfolding lines of Bach. Our poetic touch moving in these worlds is a knowing one. Then and there it can come to seem, as Bugbee has it, that in those intimate encounters, and perhaps *only* then and there, one truly knows. As Kierkegaard will put it emphatically, "To love and to know are essentially synonymous."[39]

This can't mean that knowledge that's public and propositional is false or of no value. It means that one can read the importance of impersonal fact or theory from a different angle. Once "existential knowing," tactile or "contact" knowing is alive and well, then we can trace its growth toward reclamation of the world of disciplinary research and discovery. If it's true that to know poetry I must be touched by words, or to know a child I must be touched by her smile or her cry, it's also true that to really know math, know it "from the inside," I must be touched by numbers and equations. To know the ancient Celts, know them "from the inside," I must be touched by their ways of life, their art, their songs, their way of burying the dead. To know rivers, I must enter their flow. Immersion in an historical tradition becomes intimate contact with it. True knowing, then, doesn't exclude the factual and theoretical but gives them the dimension of intimacy. We *love* fact and theory. As Kierkegaard put it in that early note, knowing can then "*come alive in me*."

Propositional knowledge is linked to giving grounds or evidence or justifications. But do we have grounds or justifications at hand for "contact" or "existential" knowing? Being at home with my slightly daft great uncle, knowing him as I do, is not primarily a propositional knowing and perhaps because of that seems to flow free of the need for public vindications. The question "How do you *back up* your claim to know that daft old man?" can only misfire. In typical circumstances, it misfires because claims to know the ways of those we live with, or to know the garden that we tend, or to know the Schubert we wake up to are not the sorts of knowings that are appropriately put under public scrutiny – as if they needed to be tested, or might be false. They're typically not items of propositional knowledge open to contestation.

To just be *familiar* with the ins and outs of that old man, my uncle, and to have a *knowing rapport* with him, is something I might testify to, bemoan, or celebrate, but it's hardly anything I could or would ever be called upon – except in the rarest circumstances – to *debate or defend or vindicate* in a public forum. *How* I know that this is my familiar red cap, or that my stomach's growling, or that this is my favorite

39 See note 25 above.

Schubert is hardly anything I'd know how to answer. I'd be rather flatfooted in trying to *back up* that knowledge, and would be either puzzled or offended if someone *asked* me to (unless *I'm* under accusation as someone who's deceptive or becoming daft). Caught up in our intimate knowing of an unfolding line from Bach, there is no question of a gap that procedures of justification or vindication have to fill. Certitudes can emerge in an ongoing flow of life, in a life that in its moment of vitality has sure traction. For the questions of justification to arise, we must for a moment, and with regard to some subset of these knowings, take a backward step. Sometimes it will make no sense to take that backward step. And we can't step back completely from our knowings because we can't intelligibly question everything serially, ad infinitum.

Neither Kierkegaard nor Socrates has any fear of stepping back from the benighted easy knowledge of their day. They have no fear of calling it in question. But they also have no fear of *not* stepping back. They have no fear of the realization that they cannot step back forever, that existence has its forward-looking claims. And so they have a spot for the sort of poetry and love and madness that sustains us beyond interrogation and beyond the products of a research program's protocols. After all, it's rather mad to know (as Socrates does) that the good man cannot be harmed, or that one should accept punishment from a court that's been unjust, or that one should believe that a tale delivered by a mysterious woman gives just the right picture of love. It must be mad for Alcibiades to fall in love with Socrates. It must be mad to say that Hamlet knows more than we do. It must be mad to know in one's heart that the sublime can instruct or that a mid-west thunderclap is our access to Job's whirlwind. Or to know that Socrates has become Christian, or that universities have lost touch with love and knowing.

We might find ourselves caught in an unfolding line from Bach, and then lose the drift; we can fall out of love. The idea that Socrates has become Christian or that the true Christian will turn the other cheek can lose its grip, and seem the worst of nonsense. Any knowledge we have by touch, by contact, is as fragile as love or poetry themselves, and as difficult to hold as the brook of Heraclitus. It can be lost to us, suddenly or by degrees. There's even an apparent inevitability at work here. Love and poetry come and go, touch us and depart. When they return, as we give up the urge to grip, it will be mainly through the ministrations of what Kierkegaard calls repetition.

We patiently await the return of those wonders, loves, and certitudes of touch. Or in the phase of their loss, we forget their allure, bygones are bygones, we "get on with our life." Or perhaps in frustration or despair, we "forever" renounce membership among initiates of loves and wonders, because we hate what we now suffer, and vow it will not be repeated. And there are some who are lost to love or wonder because they never had them – they *always* were tone-deaf to their ways. Perhaps some always were and always will be unmusical – deaf to poetry, deaf to the poetry and love and madness of religion or philosophy, even to the poetry of life.[40] Having been

40 See Richard Rorty on being musically-religiously tone-deaf or "religiously unmusical," in "Anticlericalism and Atheism," in Mark Wrathall, ed., *Religion After Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 40.

refused poetry or love, we might rail in bitter irritation at initiates of those realities, and scorn those who (by our lights) spin in base illusion.

To take the path of Socratic (or Kierkegaardian) ignorance is to know that one can't, by didactic proof or preaching, *force* another into wonder or love or the surety of contact. Initiation is non-coercive. It invites dialogue where one can *model* truths of an awakened poetic-moral-religious passion or concern, *show* contact with one's path, *share* contact with a love or wonder – or even fear – as one's next step impends.

Ignorance and a Glimpse of Truths

Subjectivity means allowing oneself to be responsive to those religious, moral, and aesthetic demands that appeal to us as initiates of poetry, wonder, grief, and love. It means being responsive to domains at once aesthetic, moral, and religious. As Rick Furtak observes, an attuned alertness can "open up the sense of sacred meaning within contingent existence."[41] Contacts with those demands and the possibilities they afford become pedagogical moments, dance movements, steps that initiates can learn from (though this learning is never a matter of simple imitation). And the good, beautiful, or sublime one seeks is not just on the scale of a city or of a vast storm and thunder-scape. It can be on the scale of an early lily, the smile of a child, the dazzling feel of granite at one's fingertips, the air above, below. As Johannes de silentio has it, one can discover the sublime in the pedestrian.

The truths thus imparted or evoked (not didactically proclaimed) are not propositional truths to test at arm's length or pocket as a creed, but an intimate touch with things that matter that's quite compatible with a Socratic "propositional ignorance." It's truth that resonates in the assurances of deep conviction, or in athletic or musical wisdom, or in love, for instance. Such intimate contact is called truth because of its inestimable value and fitness for and to life, as when we speak of a love or path or dedication that's true, of truly living, of truth in art, or of Hamlet or Kierkegaard enacting and suffering truths of the most capacious subjectivities we've had the fortune to know and not to know.

Beneath truths in representations are truths in our grasp of living varied textured ways of life, in being at home at sea, in our intimate knowledge of giving and undergoing birth, to ourselves and others, in suffering and conveying passion, in our *being grasped* by lives and their truths. Here truths appear embodied as apt attunements to varied worlds, and as aptly beckoning examplars, that, in our brief time afoot, we marvel to uncover or meet in moments of illumination.

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In the next chapter, we'll consider love as a hermeneutic filter at work as we're grasped by living truths, and contrast this with a hermeneutics of suspicion. This

41 Rick A. Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, p. 178, n. 73.

begins our venture from a broad Socratic *orientation* to Kierkegaard's writing forward. Through focused attention to particular texts and themes, we discover what yield we can harvest *from* that broad orientation. That path of discovery makes up this book's next two parts, starting with a chapter on hermeneutics, on what Kierkegaard calls "Love, this lenient interpreter." Then we consider what it is to encounter at a glance, in an *Augenblick* (or *Øieblikket*), the quick receptive-responsive scan of the eye, those striking meanings that transform our temporality.

We find our being and becoming flowing from touchstones that are present, that are future possibilities, and that are sustaining provenance behind. The eddy of the present flows fore and back. In Chapter Six, we'll see how this marks our history, begun, as Kierkegaard will say, in a glance of the eye, the glance of a woman looking out to sea. A glance can intimate a vantage on time, an intimation of eternity. It's an *intimate* eternal, co-present with an intimate temporal unfolding, each flowing through uncluttered soul. And to find oneself within such intimate accord is to find "love, this lenient interpreter."

PART TWO
Love, Ethics, and Tremors in Time

The 'I' is oneself
and one's neighbor at once.

– *Papers*, 1937

. . . makes us stand
like wonder-wounded hearers.

– *Hamlet*, V, i

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CHAPTER FIVE

Love, This Lenient Interpreter: Masks Reveal Complexity of Self

If there is a correct blindness,
only love has it.
– Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

Why read a writer's work or life? We might read for love, for love of wisdom or of God, for love of the Unknown or love of this particular writer whose life and work lies here before us. Reading for love of a writer's life and work, we'd be warmly disposed, we'd be ready to have words lift our spirit (even though, in other moods, from different lives, those words might strike us differently). Reading for love, strange to say, might also be "hiding a multitude of sins," or if not hiding them, then showing them mercy rather than submitting them to the full brunt of the law.[1]

Kierkegaard has a *Discourse* on this Biblical reminder that love is forgiving of sins, or even hides them, and he makes the hermeneutical connection, calling love "this lenient interpreter."[2] Reading in the name of love or charity lets certain aspects of a life or work fall out of sight. Apart from some good end, apart from a larger generous aim, raising suspicions, aversions, or marks of failure is, in fact, a morally suspect enterprise. Exposing fault or failure for the very pleasure of it shows a heart askew. An exposé, or "revelation," as we say, should answer to a larger purpose, for instance healing us by putting us in closer touch with a fact or circumstance that might help us through a rough patch of life. Exposing someone's failure can mark mere spite or vengeance. Bringing out failure in a tender, loving way can convey sympathy, sadness, and testify to the need to preserve love. Reading from love does not mean papering over the fissures or faults of a life. But bringing out the cracks and fissures in the life should be a prelude to a "lenient" care and receptivity – that is, if we read from a generosity of spirit, from a love of a writer's life and work.

1 This is a place to notice that a teleological suspension of ethics has to include the suspension of the law we see in forgiveness and mercy.

2 "Love Hides A Multitude of Sins," Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 280-99. "Love, this lenient interpreter" appears on p. 294. I thank John Lippitt for alerting me to this.

Charity and Suspicion

There's nearly infinite scope for a hermeneutics of suspicion. I read my daily politics that way, through a lens of caution, and often, of great mistrust. But it's a lens I drop turning to last night's Fenway Park festivities. Kierkegaard reads his Christendom suspiciously in an ideology critique that bears comparison with those of Marx or Freud or Nietzsche.[3] But somewhat paradoxically, a hermeneutics of charity, love, or affirmation can live side by side with a hermeneutics of suspicion.[4] Uncovering a covey of sin might result from a proper dose of suspicion, but that's compatible with a caring uncovering whose aim is to help love prosper. Releasing shames into a recuperative light can stem their tendency to multiply and fester while in the dark. Love needn't hide *every* multitude of sin, nor hide every sin completely. The grand unmasking narratives of Kierkegaard or Freud expose human failing *to some good end*, and thus *free us* to move on affirmatively. Then we have not just suspicion, but a concomitant hermeneutics of trust, love, or affirmation.[5]

If the amplitude of affirmation, trust, or generosity is curbed, then the swing of *ennui* and cynicism is given greater scope. At one end of a spectrum are those who hanker after scandal, sleaze, or evil just because it's there, or who gloat as the high and mighty fall, or who seek twisted pleasure in bringing others down, or who deflate innocence just for sport. In some academic quarters, a hermeneutics of suspicion occupies the high ground, so to speak. The assumption is that a trusting hermeneutics is not properly hard-headed. It betrays a naïve pre-modern faith-in-the-good in an age whose maturity is to applaud the armies of doubt.[6] Later on (p. 96), I make the case for the *primacy* of trust. Why should doubt or suspicion be given pride of place?

Mistrust can be overrated, and seem like childish stalling, or betray false expectations, as if one should have a Rule to tell us when it's best to *bet* on trust, or as if one should have an epistemologically registered chaperon to cover all our

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3 Merold Westphal reads Kierkegaard's *Postscript* as ideology critique, and more generally, he shows that the "masters of suspicion" – Freud, Mark, Nietzsche – have much to teach religion and theology. See Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1998; and *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987. The Frankfurt School's Herbert Marcuse takes Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom as an important supplement to a broadly Marxist critique of contemporary life. See Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, New York: Humanity Books, 1999.

4 For the classic statement of a hermeneutics of suspicion, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974. Also, Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

5 For a reading of Nietzsche as a "master of suspicion" who is also a "master of affirmation," see Tyler Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

6 I also discuss the primacy of trust in *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 72f. and 86f.

risks. Mistrust can get rationalized as cautious prudence, or, more deeply still, as fear of bloating up the world with illusory value – as if values that were run out of town by Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Freud might be working their way back in. If there's no place for praising trust, charity, or generosity, love's hermeneutics is drowned out, dead at the gate . Teachers like Harold Bloom, Martha Nussbaum, or Stanley Cavell keep a hermeneutics of trust alive. They show how our ambient traditions hold an unsuspected surplus of things fit for our concern and praise. That's not to promote anything as cosmic or empty as a general optimism. Their pens are fixed on less general matters, on local sites, on particular poems, novels, dramas, films or essays, and occasionally on larger works.

I have an extended example of the push and pull between a hermeneutics of suspicion or mistrust and love's lenient hermeneutics. Starting at a local site, I take up a large and celebrated biography of Kierkegaard that displays the dangers of a hermeneutics of suspicion. I'll try to neutralize the fallout of suspicion by recasting aspects of the biography under the aegis of a hermeneutics of trust or generosity. Within the present terrain, the harvest of charity is wisdom, while the spoils of suspicion are empty trifles.[7]

Reading Kierkegaard

During a recent August I found myself caught up in two newly published, impressively intelligent biographies of Kierkegaard. The author of the first, from Oslo, held the life and works in expert care, turning a Kierkegaard text or life-episode slowly to find the most appreciative light, tendering events and struggles and textual themes an alert, open, respectful embrace. This was a hermeneutics of care, if not of love, a reading stance of trust or affirmation. The author of the second was from Copenhagen. More often than I wished, I found him all too ready to catch Kierkegaard in authorial deceptions, moral blunders, or personal indignities. His hermeneutics of suspicion, I learned, was a conscious strategy. He opens his quite attractively presented book with a frank revelation.[8] "My aim," he confides, "is to uncover the cracks in the granite of genius."[9]

Let's work through the dubious assumptions that travel with this frank announcement of his mission.

1. Why should we assume that genius pretends to indestructible hardness ("the

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7 I draw no global lessons from this exercise; but I don't exclude such lessons, either.

8 See Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. For the non-Danish, "Oslo" biography, see Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

9 If my aim were to give a full review, I would cite the book's often charitable and sympathetic strands. To his credit, Garff often fails to follow the tainted practice promised in his preface. My goal is limited to bringing out a prominent strand of mistrust, and showing the consequence of that mistrust. The condescension implicit in his search for "cracks in the granite of genius" is continued when he names the personal Kierkegaard configuration he sets out to explore, "the Kierkegaard complex."

granite of genius")? Isn't it possible that genius might be pliant or supple? Does it aspire always to an indestructible immortality? Might Kierkegaard's genius have been insecure, all too aware of the finite and fragmentary? Our Copenhagen biographer stacks the deck against such reading by assuming that the genius who lived in the streets of Copenhagen from 1813 to 1856 pretended to a rock-like hardness.

2. Suspicion lurks in the author's self-assigned task of *uncovering cracks:* are we given an adversarial relation between genius and biographer, the latter heroically testing *his* strength, against a granite resistance?
3. Why assume that granite – genius – is always *flawed*? We're finite; but does that make our talent, our genius, our inspiration, inevitably flawed?
4. The impulse to hide a flaw, if there be one, is not necessarily dominant. If genius can wear its cracked vulnerability on its sleeve, it needn't be *uncovered*.
5. Why should we *expose* fragility or fault? Is tracking down someone's weakness a *duty*? Is it just the critic's *pleasure*? The hunt for fragility locks us in a primal *predator-prey* scenario. Must we sign on?

To work at "*uncovering the cracks in the granite of genius*" exemplifies an uncharitable lack of trust. And if truth be told, the stain of this approach runs even deeper.

Extending the implications of this mission to expose cracks leads us to an unexpected but persuasive conclusion. Uncovering fissures is exposing lines of weakness. Can we avoid the conclusion that the reason our author seeks cracks in the granite of genius is not just to expose flaws, but to have a target for some well-aimed blows? Our Copenhagen biographer quite frankly aims to *shatter* the genius of Kierkegaard. The rock will break along its cracks. But why announce this destructive aim? I suppose the plot of patricide is as attractive as the plot of love. If we set aside the impulse to smash idols, however, we might see the fissures of genius as wounds to be salved or covered.

Without some good purpose in mind, it can seem to be a waste of good intelligence for a writer to marshal creative energies to exposing "*cracks in the granite of genius*". And there's a lesson here for me to take to heart. Do I have some good purpose as I set about exposing cracks in the accounts that flow from the mistrusts that our Copenhagen biographer harbors? Of course the *aperçu* that love won't spotlight sin doesn't say that we should be blind to sin, or always turn the other way, or automatically forgive. Yet there's something morally distasteful in approaching Kierkegaard's life and works always on the lookout for scandal, deception, hard-heartedness, or hypocrisy, and bloating up their presence, if they're present, out of all proportion.

Now taking in my own lesson, that a generous hermeneutics should not be trumped by the undeniable allure of suspicion, let me check my impulse to merely make a trumpeting polemic of the infelicities of suspicion in the present case. There is a need to bring out alternative construals of the life and work, lay out interpretative options that otherwise get buried by an onslaught of suspicion. In this constructive and affirmative vein, let me try to place the offending aphorism in a better light. The biography's opening injunction, "Seek cracks in the granite of genius!," can

be heard in an affirmative key. We can bring that striking aphorism to a site not of destruction but of "love, that lenient interpreter." This yields a more arresting and complex writer than is available when we set out to shatter him. I can think of two more charitable readings. The first, which I pause on only for a moment, relies on the image of secret gods within Socrates' (or Kierkegaard's) harsh and lumpy exterior. Cracks might be slots or windows, windows in the hardened case of genius through which we glimpse a soul. Of course, this search might still be tainted. It might be just a chance to peep and leer. But windows might work differently. The ancient Silenos figure – so like Socrates – may have a hard, repellant exterior. But Silenos also gave a glimpse of gods secreted within.[10] We could do worse than hope for such a sight through "cracks" in Kierkegaard's exterior.

There is a second more charitable reading of the image of cracks in the granite of genius. I'll give it an extended elaboration.

Trusting contact

As an occasional visitor to the magnificent and humbling Yosemite Valley, I often watch, mesmerized, as climbers ascend the massive granite face of El Capitan, alone, finding their route by hand and foot and rope along tiny cracks and fissures. The cracks and fissures are neither signs of vulnerability nor narrow windows to an interior. They mark a pathway for an intimate, loving kind of knowledge, a wisdom and final satisfaction (as final as can be), a knowing that's more than factual or theoretical or prudential (though each of these may play a necessary part). It's an Old Testament hands-on intimacy, a contact and connection with a world or a surface or a face, an intimacy that can be frightful, or reassuring, or both.

Of course, a full taxonomy of knowledge would go beyond the fourfold factual, theoretical, prudential, and tactile or intimate that I suggest here. There's also "know-how," and perhaps "knowing one's way about" would figure in as well. Bertrand Russell distinguished knowledge by description from knowledge by acquaintance, but "acquaintance" strikes far too low a key for the cognitive impact of my witness of a powerful scene from Shakespeare, my knowing of a thunderclap in the hearing of it, or my knowing of an ocean swell in the rowing of it.[11] Henry

10 I thank David L. Miller for reminding me of this ancient figure.

11 Rick Furtak talks of a sort of intimate knowing he calls "emotional knowing" in "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith: Henry David Thoreau and Stanley Cavell on Seeing and Believing," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, forthcoming. Somewhere in this taxonomy we should note the parallels and differences between "knowledge" when we confront and are overtaken by a vista of raging sea and "knowledge of pain," which is certainly not a matter of observation or theory and escapes representation in something like the way the raging sea escapes representation. In pain, we can lack concepts altogether, and have to rest content with metaphor: "a stabbing pain, a burning pain." In the sublime, we suffer, in a way, with an excess of concepts and representations, perspectives, and thematics, all in a rage. Emily Dickinson tells us: "Pain – has an Element of Blank – / It cannot recollect / When it begun – or if there were / A time when it was not – / It has no Future – but itself – / Its Infinite contain / Its past – enlightened to perceive / New Periods – of Pain." (1863). *The*

Bugbee explores a kind of "tactile wisdom" or intimacy with one's surroundings that he calls "immersion."[12] To know the world that one's immersed in is to have immediate visceral access. There's cognition in being caught up imaginatively and affectively in making or composing, and there's also cognition in undergoing or suffering a passion. Giving birth creatively is both a making and an undergoing, a suffering and a doing. Such knowing as one undergoes or suffers in the process is not a matter of "mere acquaintance," nor is it knowing how to negotiate or cope, nor is it factual or theoretical.

I think of "tactile wisdom" as the knowledge the rock climber has of the wall, or that a lover has of a face, or that a mother has of her child's pain. It's not cerebral, or not only that, though it requires intelligence, even "bodily intelligence," and it may involve the kind of emotional self-knowledge that allows one to gauge one's fear and excitement as cues to what's happening, and what comes next. It might resemble the immediate, often awe-filled Old Testament carnal knowledge between mortals, but it might also resemble knowing God in wrestling him, or knowing him in something like the musical theophany at the end of *The Book of Job.* In *Job* intimate knowledge is more than immersion, it's invasive, a sublime overwhelming. With intimate (or tactile) wisdom, we pull toward what Kierkegaard might call essential or saving knowledge. In such intimacy, one is enmeshed, reticulated with the rock, the river, the lover, the great divine song in *Job.* It's a knowing that requires the great risks of faith or care or trust.[13]

This image of tactile knowing clears the way for a generous way of reading. It invites us to inch along the weathered and more recent wrinkles in the face of genius, vulnerable and hanging over 70,000 fathoms, in something close to tenuous embrace. It's an image for a stint with Kierkegaard, approaching the writer and his work daringly, receptively, tactilely, taking in wonders and redemptions not otherwise accessible.

Initiating Images

Hermeneutics can focus on an image, say the image of negotiating a crack in granite, or on a passage, or an indefinitely large number of images, phrases and passages: not to mention a life – the actions, needs, and projects that carry passages and texts along. Interpreting a life and writing starts *somewhere*. What *is* this "life," this "work"? Where, and on what, does the hermeneutic impulse get its grip?

There's an "undecidability" lurking in this query. Start with the texts? The life? When in the life? Where in which text? And this uncertainty is also a moment to be decisively alive to the mystery of this other, this life and work – chilled, awed,

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Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. R. W. Franklin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 339-49, (number 960).

12 See Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: A Philosophical Exploration in Journal Form*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999.

13 Perhaps it resembles what Cavell calls "Acknowledgment," his term of art for a way of recognition and contact with oneself, others, and the world that is not a matter of knowing-as-perception or as inference.

humbled by its unmanageability, its unfathomability. Then some obscure force gathers welter into focus. We say (or think), "*This* is Kierkegaard! – *Here's* where he stands!" We know it's a place where we can stand with him to begin to sketch this figure, still strange but familiar enough to begin to know. Some of the whirl recedes. But what *authorizes* the ready declaration, "*This is Kierkegaard! This is where he stands*"? What authorizes starting with Kierkegaard as strolling citizen, or as Copenhagen's Socrates? Or as Regine's absent lover, or as the Bishop's bitter enemy, or as his father's wayward son? What authorizes starting with him as Sibbern's brilliant student? Among the endless possibilities a figure snaps into focus under an aspect of familiarity that allows us to begin.

We still ask, "What authorizes us to begin just where we do"? Perhaps the question is a little off-key. Scanning the pond, what authorizes our simple declaration, "That's a duck!" – or, to complicate matters, what authorizes our declaration "That's a duck!" when it's the reversible duck-rabbit figure that comes into view? Or "That's a rabbit!" Or, since we're getting into it, "That's a duck-rabbit!" – or even, dismissively, "That's just random lines on paper!"? It happens that things *gel* a certain way. It *happens*, pure and simple, without august, articulate authority.[14]

"*This* is *Kierkegaard*!" we say, as he clicks into view, and a series of alternatives (a *differently figured* Kierkegaard, or the Kierkegaard *not yet there for me*) clicks decisively off-screen. In fact, there's no deep authorization here. It wouldn't help to find a reassuring signature "Made by SK" affixed to swirling shards, for we can still ask, "Why make that signature *definitive?* What, after all, *is* an SK signature?" It might lie or deflect or show up accidentally, with neither rhyme nor reason. Of course Kierkegaard is hydra-headed, a monstrous whirl of tendencies and themes, passages and tomes, engagements and attacks, prayers and idle walks. But still we say, "*This is Kierkegaard*!" And we find our feet with him, and stay with him to enter the alluring labyrinth awaiting us, now called "Kierkegaard." And in the tangle of his life and texts, we latch on to a guiding image around which things gel.

Consider three images we find in the frontispiece to Alastair Hannay's 1982 Kierkegaard book, *Socrates, Satan, Saint*.[15] This trio invites divergent outlines for a reading. Socrates, Saint, Satan – each face gives us footing in an otherwise unmanageable whirl. A script might appear under the aspect of Socrates, which would bring out the irritating, ironic, yet brilliantly intelligent interrogator – and one who's immersed in love, and steadfastly loyal to the city and to the good. A script could show us Kierkegaard as Mephistopheles, full of devilish guile, rebellion, and seduction. It could script Kierkegaard as a saintly martyr, show his devotion as a way of "dying to the world." The tangle we so confidently label "Kierkegaard" can be tamed by images rich enough to be drawn out in a scripted narrative expression.

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14 In the background, I hear Jack Caputo's "obligation happens." See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993. Identification of particulars as the particulars they are, we might say, in the ordinary course of things "just happens". We neither have nor need, as a rule, authorization for declaring "I'm obliged (here)!"; or "that's a rabbit!"; or "*this* [pointing to the shelf of books] is *Kierkegaard*!"

15 Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: The Arguments of the Philosophers*, New York: Routledge, 1982.

There's a possibility that Kierkegaard might be all three – Satan, Saint, and Socrates. It wouldn't be as if he were simultaneously carrot-like, oak-like, and tulip-like. It would be more as if he were sometimes Satanic, sometimes Saintly, sometimes Socratic. It might be preferable to have a single mold into which to pour a life's complexity, and some lives may in fact fit a single mold without distorting much detail. But I suspect most lives have no single shape – or, better put, something is lost the minute we cast the tangle of a life into a single mold. Rather than reduce a life to an image, or set of images, we might expand a life as variegated as Kierkegaard's so that it includes what he accomplished, which was to write strange books of endless variety. And that life should also include what those books have accomplished in his name, and continue to accomplish. It then becomes a fantasy to seek a single mold. Far better to settle pretty early in the casting for an *indefinite variety* of molds – far more than three or four, and as apparently opposed (yet strangely congruent) as Satan, Saint, or Socrates.

Hermeneutical Tilt

Does a guiding image boost one sort of hermeneutics rather than another? Casting Kierkegaard as Satan colors him suspiciously, reflecting and instigating fear and mistrust. But our imaginations may just be shallow here. Some devils might be endearing.[16] *Affection* for Mephisto might yield a kind of wisdom. Perhaps he's a lovable imp, and so quite forgiveable. Casting Kierkegaard as Socrates colors him affirmatively, reflecting and instigating charity in interpretation – but then the gadfly might turn out to be an argumentative snob. Casting Kierkegaard as Saint reflects and furthers charity in interpretation – but then, Saints can be insufferable. Even as a guiding image falls in place, how it's taken isn't settled. Interpretative options exist *all along the way*. An image grips – happens, strikes – and then in the aftermath we read it out along one of several plausible expressive paths. We can't tell off the cuff if an initiating image betokens a generous spirit or a cramped and choking one.

The initiating image in an interpretative venture can be dramatically suggestive, but we discover what it suggests only as we *join up and follow* one of its plausible trajectories, only as we set out on the interpretative path we hew (and also find). Accepting the bestowal of an image and following it out requires *trust*. This is the fertile kernel of a somewhat Kantian transcendental deduction of the *practical priority of trust (or love).*

Does interpretation go "all the way down"? If absolutely every fledgling interpretation-attempt is halted by the protest that it's resting on an underlying one to which we should shift attention, then every interpretative gesture becomes a non-starter. Any *viable* interpretation will bottom somewhere. Say we elaborate a Kierkegaard-as-Socrates. We start with an unauthorized immediate sense, perhaps amidst a whirl, "*This is Kierkegaard! This is Kierkegaard-Socrates!*" That's the *given* there to work with. A backward step, in accord with theoretical compunctions, lets us see that what we *take* as bottom is *theoretically contingent*.

16 The Satan of The Book of Job and Ivan Karamazov's Satan, not to mention Faust's, have admirable qualities. In some sense we learn to like them. They needn't be inhuman beasts. Ivan's is a "harmless" scholar.

From that detached position, we can see that what *strikes* us as inescapable bottom can be taken as yet another tacit interpretation. But while interpretation is actually underway and flourishing, it presumes, as a *practical necessity*, a sense of contact, a certitude of footing, from which to build. We have the brute sense that *this* is where we start. Ah, *this* is *Socrates*! Or, aha! It's a *duck-rabbit*! Experientially and imaginatively, the bottom is inescapable.

The bottom that gives us footing *might* have been otherwise, *might* not hold, and there might *be* no bottom (from a God's eye point of view). Paradoxically, to say "interpretation goes all the way down!" *assumes* a God's eye point of view. But rejecting such omniscience, we concede that we always already start within a practical frame, with interpretations underway that one by one presume a bottom, a ground from which they launch. That's the place of trust (and perhaps love). With a little ingenuity, skepticism can always find a way to disengage, to invoke suspicion. In answer, Cavell says that the one permissible (or "correct") blindness is the blindness of love, of falling in love with the world.[17] We love *this* world, can't live without *this* angle on the world. The answer to skepticism is not theoretical refutation but a practical acknowledgment of our ties, our given loves, our commitments and trusts. (Of course, we might have loved a different world, or never loved at all.)

To grant the priority of trust and contact is to refuse the priority of theory. If we're struck by Kierkegaard-as-Socrates, and are committed to the tasks of interpretation, we have a go at it, we let that image have its way with us, take over. Yielding to its pull, the "as" can quickly lose its experiential hold. After all, I don't see my three-year-old *as* a pretty tike – she *is* one. I don't see Kierkegaard *as* Socrates – he *is* that feisty gadfly. When the space and time of *actual, ongoing interpretation* supervenes, the floor is given as a base from which it builds. We find ourselves already in the interpretative venture. A quasi-Kantian transcendental justification of a practical priority for trust would assert that *if interpretative reading exists and is already underway, then its condition is that it build on something that, in that context, is basic, bottom, primitive.* Every interpretative ship underway floats on some surface that for the moment presents itself as secure. If our interpretations run full sail ahead, we must have trust in that.[18]

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17 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 431. This is a theme I discuss in "Acknowledgment, Suffering, and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," *Soundings*, Fall, 2005.

18 This embryonic transcendental deduction of "the given" that I suggest resembles Ricoeur's recognition of the necessity of a "second naiveté," and what Kierkegaard calls a "second immediacy." From an apparently different camp, consider Bernard Williams: "I must deliberate from where I am. Truthfulness requires trust in that, and not the obsessional and doomed drive to eliminate it." Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 200. See, too, my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, p. 72f. and 86f.

Concealing and Revealing

Kierkegaard provides a surplus of partially competing open-ended stories of his life and works. This creates a worry for charitable readings. When versions differ, which do we affirm? Perhaps conflicting motives (and proliferating pseudonyms) are meant to throw us off track. With our Copenhagen biographer, the tilt is toward prevarication, pretense, or hidden shames. That's the hermeneutics of suspicion. Yet as a general matter, revising or reshaping self-interpretations isn't necessarily suspect. A change of story doesn't always indicate deception or dishonesty. After all, it's not a *courtroom* or a bookstore *credit* identity that's at issue. It's an identity more intimate and elusive whose "true shape" depends in large measure on the way a person – in this case Kierkegaard – hews, discovers, articulates it. Should the self-portrait be Heroic-Epic? Faustian? Socratic? Should we switch guiding images mid-stream? Should *he* switch images?

As we'd expect, Kierkegaard experiments. Putting *this* in focus blurs *that* – or puts it out of range. Experiments are needed, for one can't know *if*, or how *well*, a shoe will fit until one puts it on. And experiments will be ongoing. Both life and its expressive accounts will wear with time and often beg for alteration, if not major overhaul. Honesty doesn't deliver a *single* "state of the self" account. It just delivers an account as truthful as can be – as one lives out and through a plurality of versions, each always painfully, promisingly, incomplete.

Kierkegaard leaves us the preliminary studies to sort through, and if truth be told, nothing *but* preliminaries. This in part just goes with the territory. We might say that no life has a final version. But in part it is precisely Kierkegaard's exploratory venture to *show* us the inescapable variability of self-portraiture, each effort bound to be seen, in retrospect and with time, as preliminary. He portrays himself now as jesting, now as offensive, now as purely yearning; now as Faust, now as Socrates, now as would-be Christian. Each expression tunes him to a local setting and is offered as a try for the truth of that episode in the life unfolding. What that life is at present includes its promise – its *pledge* – for tomorrow. This reminds us that we're dealing with *truths* embedded in the narrative of a life, indexed to time and place – not the chimera of a single, timeless truth of the matter. A courtroom demand for *all the truth and nothing but the truth* has its local uses. But it's at cross-purposes with honest growth, considered at close quarters. There, the truth is uncertain and yet to be determined. Granting all this deflates the charge insinuated in the Copenhagen biography, that because we encounter multiple self-narratives, Kierkegaard accordingly deceives, launching some narratives as cover-ups of others.

Closer to the Text

"Hilarius Bookbinder," a lesser pseudonym, offers the public something our biographer calls a "counterfeit."[19] The charge is that at the last moment Kierkegaard brings two previously independent books together, thereby tricking us. At the shop we assume that what we buy *is*, and all along *was*, a single work. But why assume

19 Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 340.

this? Its "author," after all, is (eponymously) one who stitches books together. That's a revelation (for those with eyes to see), not a deception. And even if Kierkegaard weren't so forthright, there'd be nothing deceptively counterfeit in his practice. At the eleventh hour an artist can join two canvases at first taken to be separate – without moral culpability. Kierkegaard presents the printer with what he declares to be a single book, and that declaration *makes* it single. The presentation is a performative truth-maker that can trump alternative construals, including any Kierkegaard may have previously made. This charitable reading highlights Kierkegaard's creative inventiveness and allows wisdom to accrue. And in any case, the writer at the printer's shop with *Stages on Life's Way* was himself book *binder.*

Kierkegaard attaches a pseudonym to a manuscript en route to the printer, one that *reveals*. There's no sin here for love to hide or to forgive. He shows our inner lives as subject to continual couplings and uncouplings, bindings and unbindings. My inner story depends on how I couple story bits together – and uncouple other bits. Rembrandt can touch up a self-portrait years after its first rendition. This is not a shady business.

Anxiety in the face of fragmentation is a mark of modern life. Traditional roles and authorities for settling identity slowly fall apart. Kierkegaard accentuates this unsettling dynamic by taking up a polemical relationship to his own writing and identity.[20] This keeps both in motion. He's unafraid to hear a change of tune – or to *change* his tune. Far from being fickle or a deceiver, even a godly one, as some hold, he's quite frank in laying bare the struggles, the feints and parries, that constitute conflicting contours inevitable in the formation of a modern (or postmodern) self. [21]

How Masks Reveal

"*Masks are masks*," you say, "*devices for concealment if not deception.*" Yes, they *can* deceive, and partially conceal. But they also can reveal, which can be a helpful and charitable view. Playing Hamlet, I show a side of myself not otherwise available. If I pretend to be a bear, I growl and show myself in unexpected ways. There's no necessary deception in play, and quite a bit of revelation.

Furthermore, the very task of self-revelation requires a phase of trying out a role, trying on a *persona*, experimenting with what we could call a mask. We're apt to think that honesty requires casting off the masks, and there's some truth in that – we try to get beneath affectations. But self-articulation is often as much taking *on* a mask as removing one. I pull myself together to look brave, because I need to here – and that itself, putting a brave face on, can affirm my capacity *to be* brave. Covers can be exploratory or mandatory, and, in either case, not *necessarily* an affectation or deception. I display my game face, my doctor comes to look the part he is as he enters the surgery theater. My visage is gentleness pleading for expression; my

20 I discuss how Kierkegaard's polemics, irony, and final "revocation" keep his writing, and us, alive, in Chapter Twelve.

21 For another account that finds pervasive deception in Kierkegaard's authorship, see M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

countenance is masked in grief. These crucial moments of self-revelation require a face, a face we in some sense don. There's no crime in that.

Owning and disowning masks is the way every child grows, and even as adults growth means owning and disowning. Of course, we inhabit, or have access to, a far wider range of expressions, of covers, than could ever be lined up for *explicit* owning and disowning. Much of this occurs behind our back. It's not a matter of a pre-existing self-essence getting pressed out into view. A self-expressive visage is just an expression *than which there is nothing deeper*. It's not *put on* or *delivered by* something "deeper" that exists "earlier" than the delivery.[22] Masks seem *intrinsically* dishonest in robberies. But that can be taken as a special, not a paradigmatic, case.

Richard Burton puts on his Hamlet face. That's not dishonest. A deep and misleading picture is at work, even when we imagine Burton *non-deceptively* becoming Hamlet. We imagine the self as a fixed glassy essence that a mask unfortunately (or fortunately) hides. But surely we know *more* about Kierkegaard by *seeing* the mask, seeing the signature "Johannes Climacus" or "Johannes de silentio." And this does not require seeing any essence. We know *more* about Burton and Hamlet as the actor dons the mask, not less, and we never see the glassy prior essence of either Hamlet *or* Burton. There's mutual revelation here. We know more about Kierkegaard (or Burton or Hamlet) *through and because of the mask* – there's revelation without our having to assume something deeply hidden of which the performance is an expression. In this light, Kierkegaard's tactic of proliferating pseudonyms is not a device to hide a deep and secret self but a way to display *his inventiveness, the plasticity of the world*, and *the variety of his faces-to-the-world.*

A hermeneutics of suspicion, in league with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche (and perhaps Foucault) has had a good run at unmasking, at doubting the very idea of self-revelation. But we needn't make a *fetish* of unmasking. An actor trying on fictive roles is not promulgating fictions. Someone floating many stories of who he is, is not necessarily *hiding something*. Writing out identity through revisable experiments may be the inescapable modern fate. Changing faces, donning masks, finding new worlds to which we are receptive, may be no more culpable than switching (or being switched) from parenting to brokering, from weekend tennis to a transforming museum moment before a Goya nightmare. Are we importantly the *same* through all these changes? Where is the glassy essence the skeptic thinks we hide or cover up?

I don't pretend that I've made much decisive headway in settling fundamental debates in a contemporary metaphysics of the self.[23] But I do hope to have given life to the idea that Kierkegaard puts his signature on the age by writing out, living

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22 "Behold the dawn! The face of things is changed by it!" Here Job's voice unveils an expressive world with no "essential world" behind it of which it is the expression. This conviction, that embracing an expressive self is not embracing the picture of an essential self that "pushes itself out" in expressions, needs considerable elaboration – much more than I can easily accomplish here. For a helpful treatment of perceptive, expressive attunement to the world see Anthony Rudd, *Expressing the World: Skepticism, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger*, Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2003.

23 There are a number of critiques of a "narrative unity" view of the self, as well as of the view that this "unity" is no more than my present identification with an immediately preceding self. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,

out, a theater of ever-shifting lines, parts, crises, and resolutions that are lasting revelations.

Hiding Meaning in the Texts

Mistrust hides what's profound about pseudonyms or masks – that they don't just hide, but can reveal. In the case of our Copenhagen biographer, the hermeneutics of suspicion or mistrust leads to the suppression of some of Kierkegaard's most important texts. *Soap Cellars*, an unpublished Kierkegaardian miniature, gets more pages in this new biography than the giant, and massively important, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.* Reading between the lines, *Soap Cellars* lets us see the people Kierkegaard likes to parody or mock in the cultural circles he traveled in. He "hides" the true objects of his amusement, we might say. But if no attempt is made to wrestle with the *Postscript*, how can we appreciate the reception Kierkegaard has enjoyed by generations of philosophers and theologians – Bultmann, Heidegger, Tillich, or Wittgenstein, for example? After all, it's *Postscript*, not *Soap Cellars*, that argues directly about what's central to a self, about truth and subjectivity, about "objective uncertainty" and faith, about the relevance of history to personal identity, about irony and humor and the paradox of Christ – and so on. To spend so little time with *Postscript*, or *Fragments*, as this contemporary biographer does, is something like presenting Lance Armstrong without the Tour de France, or Beethoven without the Late Quartets. My own suspicion is that *Postscript* floats its own dialectic of trust and mistrust, a dialectic powerful enough to bite someone looking for an easy unmasking of it.[24]

Our biographer's hermeneutics of suspicion feeds appetites for scandal, which means he misses richness even in the particular texts he covers at some length. He links *Fear and Trembling*, which depicts Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, to Kierkegaard's supposed culpability in breaking his engagement to Regine. He reads the four opening Abraham scenarios as a simple progress in deception. This makes the central event on Moriah the fact of Abraham *deceiving* Isaac – and nothing worse! As if telling the truth – telling Isaac what he was about to do – would have made everything all right (at least between Abraham and his son). But that would hardly fix his dilemma on Moriah. For a reader fixated on suspicion and a fascination with Kierkegaard-the-deceiver, the story of Moriah becomes hopelessly truncated, and so distorted.

Although a reading needn't, and probably shouldn't, start with Kierkegaard's infamous broken engagement, it's worthwhile seeing what a hermeneutics of charity might make of that traumatic episode in his life. With charity, we might picture Kierkegaard with two life-defining relationships at stake – one to his writing (intermixed with religious passion), one to Regine (intermixed with worldly expectations). Both relationships make totalistic, exhaustive, and exclusive demands on him. His commitment to writing religiously seems every bit as all-consuming as

1986; and John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, eds, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2001.

24 See Chapter Twelve.

his commitment to his fiancée. This forces a terrible question. Which, we ask, should be *abandoned*? Let's say that a compromise, splitting the difference, being half-writer, half-husband, is out of the question. We then have a major crisis of identity that Kierkegaard must undergo. But an *unmasking* hermeneutics bent on seeing only deception cannot *see* or *formulate* this crisis.

To be sure, on a generous, charitable view, it's still terrible to sacrifice one's *beloved* to one's vocation; but then it must be terrible, too, to sacrifice one's *vocation*! We needn't say Kierkegaard was *right* to abandon Regine. But neither can we say it would have been right to abandon a writerly or religious vocation for her. It might be plain wrong to break the engagement and be plain wrong to let the engagement stand. If so, then the theme of the Abraham scenarios is not the web of culpable deceptions so attractive to our suspicious biographer. Instead those scenarios convey an imponderable and terrifying question. How is one to proceed gracefully (if that's at all possible), or even to survive, when incompatible identity-constituting commitments bear down killingly? This is at the heart of Kierkegaard's dilemma, and Abraham's too, for Abraham faces the terror of abandoning a call from God or abandoning a call from son and wife.

Once we set aside a blinding fixation on deception, we can see this issue of incompatible life-commitments, and the necessity of sacrifice, as *the* central, twisting conflict of the text. And we can also see thereby the impossible redemption that the text proposes. It's hardly a possibility available to practical common sense, but the narrative proposes it anyway. Abraham must know that his situation is impossible (he can't live without abandoning one of his identity-constituting commitments). And yet he knows that, since God is the *dominant* factor in his situation, then perhaps his situation is *not* impossible – that, for God, all things are possible, and so God can ask for Isaac and yet keep His promise that Isaac will continue Abraham's seed.

God can handle impossibilities, as it were. He can handle the weight of the general moral injunction that *a father love and protect his son*. He can carry that weight *along with* carrying the weight of His having made a particular demand that *Isaac (a son) must die by Abraham's (his father's) hand*. He can carry those impossible burdens *along with* carrying the weight of having made a particular *promise that the son-to-be-killed won't* die, but will carry a seed into an endless future. Carrying this threefold weight (constituted by impossibly divergent requirements) is impressive – to say the least! Yet with God, all things are possible – God *is* that all things are possible. The *Genesis* conundrum exemplifies this. *Either* we have utter conceptual-psychological chaos and the personal breakdown occasioned by intractable cross-purposes – *or* we embrace the faith that with God all things are possible. These stark alternatives lay out the conditions of what in Chapter Ten I'll call an ethical sublime.

Lurking somewhere in this dramatic interchange between God and Abraham must be the thought that God's capacity to live with and in and through His self-initiated field of wrenching conflict (these primal impossibilities *are* possible for Him) is at the same time an aspect of Abraham's capacity to survive this other-initiated field of adversity and promise (the adjunct impossibilities *might* be possible

for him – in the event, they *are* possible for him).[25] It's as if we're meant to think that what's possible for God (despite a seeming impossibility) might also perforce be possible for an individual (despite a seeming impossibility). It's as if we're meant to think that *God*'s weathering the impossible helps *us* to weather the impossible, or to see our way in that direction.

For Kierkegaard, it's not just a matter of weathering the agony, as Derrida would have it, of knowing that I sacrifice many in responding to some – that I sacrifice Isaac in responding to God. That's the agony of tragedy or resignation.[26] Abraham's trust or faith exhibits a withering assault of an even higher order "impossibility" or

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25 A discussion with Clark West about Spinoza's striking claim that the intellectual love of God is God's love of God has been of help here. One could see Abraham's struggle with God as a reflection of God's internal struggle with Himself. The formula corresponding to Spinoza's might be: "A person's struggles with God are God's struggle with God."

26 In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida takes the Abraham-Isaac scenario to exemplify the boundlessness of responsibility which entails the agony that, in answering God, Abraham sacrifices Isaac; in answering the needs of my daughter, I sacrifice the needs of endless other daughters; by feeding my cat, I abandon thousands of others. Kierkegaard would object on two scores. First, my obligations are never as global and simultaneous as Derrida (without argument) assumes: God may be equally responsible for all at every moment, but finite creatures find the needs of the neighbor sufficient unto the day. To attend in thought to all the neighbors neglected as one tends the neighbor next to one would be to short-change the attention that this near neighbor demands and deserves. It's a morality-undermining grandiosity to think that we owe all to everyone every minute. Second, faith is *not* the capacity to "impossibly" live through the sacrifice of all those I don't attend to in the moment of attending to just one, but the capacity to "impossibly" believe I haven't *lost* those whom I sacrifice – that I haven't lost Isaac, I'll get him back. Derrida describes a condition close to that of the Knight of Infinite Resignation, who realizes he will never attain the object of his love (in Derrida's case, never attain the satisfaction of responding to the needs of every claimant on him). If he were to follow Kierkegaard, Derrida's extrapolation from the Isaac-Abraham scenario should be that, in answering God (or my neighbor) I necessarily forego attention to others (not endless ones, which makes a mockery of *any* obligation, and is a frivolous counsel of despair), but that nevertheless, despite the terribleness of the call or demand upon me, I have faith that my moral obligation to the other will not wither, will remain robust, will not be irrevocably severed or "killed off;" and in fact (incredibly, by virtue of hope, faith) will not go unfulfilled. Derrida writes as if the agony of faith is knowing that, in helping some, I abandon (or kill) others. That's not Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard the agony-joy of faith is "knowing" that abandoning-receiving back is possible, that I'll sacrifice Isaac and get him back. We might put an extra twist on this and suggest an analogy with the Gospel view that he who loses his life shall regain it, giving up my life is to gain it, giving up my Isaac is to gain him, giving up my (inevitably) selfish hold on my son is releasing him for life and conjointly releasing me for life. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 70-71. (It should be said that Derrida considers several other aspects of the Abraham story that are extremely provocative.)

The best discussion of Derrida's many-leveled misreading is John J. Davenport, "What Kierkegaard Adds to Alterity Ethics: How Levinas and Derrida Miss the Eschatological Dimension," in J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, eds, A *Conversation Between Neighbors: Emmanuel Levinas and Søren Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2008.

"absurdity." Abraham's faith is that God will give him Isaac back. Faith is not the strength to "tough out" the fact that in answering God one is losing Isaac (though that poses a terrible existential test). Faith is the strength to have joy and terror intermixed within a scenario beyond the tragic. Faith is to have *joy in the expectation of Isaac's return even as one has terror in the expectation that Isaac will be lost*. This is not an aspect of *Fear and Trembling* that Derrida chooses to discuss.

Abraham's faith, then, is akin to God's "trust or faith" that He can order Isaac to be sacrificed and (quite incredibly) expect Abraham *to keep loving Isaac and keep loving God.* And superimposed on that incredulity, He can order Isaac up and expect Abraham *to keep believing in the promise* that his seed, that Isaac's seed, will not perish – that he'll get Isaac back. How could God *not* see that he's serving Abraham a concatenation of *impossibilities*, of *human* impossibilities? And how could God not know that Abraham would have the power to joyfully-fearfully, apparently impossibly, *weather* these impossibilities? God seems to weather them, and expects Abraham to, as well. And apparently Abraham succeeds – though we can't say or picture how that could be. All silentio's attempts fail, as we'll see in Chapter Eight.

The parallel with Kierkegaard's quandary is straightforward and exact. If he *had had* faith (he confesses that he didn't), Kierkegaard would have married Regine in the trust or faith that God "impossibly" would provide his religious writerly existence back. Or alternatively, in opting for a religious writerly existence that accordingly suspends the ethical requirement that he honor his engagement to Regine, Kierkegaard would have maintained the "impossible" faith and hope that he would get her (and the ethical) back.[27] Dare we *fault* Kierkegaard for falling short of such impossible faith?

The Allure of Undersides

There's no good reason to think that, as a general matter, a hermeneutics of mistrust trumps a hermeneutics of love. And, in any case, we can show that the hermeneutics of love shows us parts of a writer's life and works that are blotted out by a hermeneutics of suspicion. Taking the path of "love, that lenient interpreter," provides a helpful and hospitable welcome and receptivity to the non-debunking idea that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and masks do not (only) hide but *reveal*. Charity helps that thought along. Furthermore, we've seen that suspicion blots out the central theme of a central text, *Fear and Trembling*. And on a more general front beyond the reading or misreading of particular texts, a charitable reading of Kierkegaard's life and works has no need to leap headlong, as our present biographer does, into unmasking a purportedly pervasive sexual subtext.

Unfortunately, this new biography loses credit through recurrent digressions along sexual paths that do little to illuminate the life, and even less to illuminate the texts. There are over a dozen pages on a confessedly undocumented bordello incident, on fear of syphilis, and on the criminality of masturbation in the culture's

27 For a fuller treatment of these issues, see my *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991.

imagination. All this makes for "interesting" reading, as Kierkegaard might say. It tells us something about cultural sensibilities and fears in Copenhagen (and elsewhere) in 19th-century Europe.

A hermeneutics of suspicion too easily unearths this otherwise buried material. But how does it bear on the life and works at hand? Are we to suppose that fear of syphilis or masturbation had an *especially* powerful effect on Kierkegaard's life and works – an effect decidedly in *excess* of the part that these factors might play in the most commonplace of lives? Is the anomalous, *excessive* power of these factors accordingly determinative of the shape and content of this most extraordinary life and work? That would be hard to establish. Why assume that sexual fears had greater effect in shaping the life and work than a love of extravagant cuisine or chatting with town folk, or surveying the sea – or more to the point, a passion for Shakespeare, Mozart, and Socrates? The rule of thumb, from the standpoint of a hermeneutics of charity, is that even documented shames or scandals are worth retelling only if their revelation serves a charitable end. Otherwise, what's gained by our exposure to them? Perhaps they just feed a voyeuristic impulse.

Our author traces echoes of masturbation resurfacing in the repetitions of writing – and in the formal concept, "repetition." He doesn't explicitly claim that Job's repetition – his being "blown away" by an overpowering storm that both empties him and brings him exquisitely alive – is a sexual *ekstasis*. But the dots seem to point that way. He catches Kierkegaard repetitively recycling favorite passages through his writing in a kind of pleasurable self-plagiarism.[28] But why is this a sin – as opposed to a fairly common process for creative minds? Self-citation is common enough in film and music, but not on that count an evident sin or defect.

Some of the "interesting" interpretations provided by our biographer are spell-binding, informative, and laid out with enviable flair and sustained suspense. But the question remains whether what purports to be a major biography of a figure whose footprint on contemporary culture is immense, whose works shape it through and through, should spend so much time with material that does little more than feed the thrill of peeking and being in on nasty secrets. Our biographer sketches what he calls "a Kierkegaard complex." The non-stop obsessive scribbling is seen as a compensatory tactic exploited by a wounded ego unable to negotiate a sexually healthy existence. That takes Kierkegaard *down* a notch. At last we're meant to think that the fissured granite of this genius has been shattered under another writer's sustained, sophisticated, but ultimately condescending hammer tap.

Ending Upbeat

A more generous look would marvel at the dazzling transformation Kierkegaard effects in turning so many pedestrian things toward surpassing religio-poetic affirmations. That raises Kierkegaard *up* a notch. His life and work are made to make life richer all around. As we read, so we will be read; and as we would be read,

28 Does this recycling of passages make Kierkegaard only a kid only rearranging blocks – and "playing with himself" to boot?

so we *should* read. As Kierkegaard puts it, "To the one who loves a thing, that thing reveals itself to him . . . to love and to know . . . are essentially synonymous."[29] Here we have the labile face of this astonishing Copenhagen citizen. We seek the lines in which the weathered beauty of a life are etched, and as a climber might, then trace in them the pathways for a gentle – yet often crushingly vibrant and unsettling – tactile knowledge of the writer and his texts.

29 Hannay, *Papers*, 48, IX, A 438.

CHAPTER SIX

Anxious Glances: A Seaward Look Renews Time and Seeker

We will all be changed
In a moment,
in the twinkling of an eye.
– 1 Corinthians 15:51-2

Vigilius Haufniensis, watchman of Copenhagen, keeps anxious vigil through the night. His nightwatch uncovers a dark truth, the truth that history begins "in the glance of an eye."[1] How can this truth survive the light of day? What kind of a report is this from a man accustomed to dark, who can write a nearly impenetrable work on *angst*? His gnomic intimation falls from the night like the word of Nietzsche's madman – *God is dead*. But perhaps his word is contra-Nietzsche, and not all that mad. Be that as it may, what sort of history could begin in a glance? The answer seems to be that a glance might provide access to human temporality, to "lived time"; and might provide a context for thinking about "repetition" as the saving form temporality might take. In fact, Vigilius gives us a figure to reflect on as we wrestle with this glance that opens up to time and repetition – not to say eternity. It's the figure of a princess looking out to sea. But we'll start somewhat closer to home with another image of an anxious sea-watch opening on time.

1 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 89. I follow Eriksen, Pattison, and Lowrie in rendering *Øieblikket* as "the glance" or "the glance of the eye." See Niels Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000; George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, Theology*, New York: Routledge, 2002; and Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944. I am indebted to Eriksen and Pattison for the inspiration of this essay. Kierkegaard confesses that "'Øieblikket' [is] a difficult but beautiful expression, a metaphorical expression" (*Concept of Anxiety*, Thomte, p. 87). "The glance" resonates nicely with the seducer's erotic glance that "brings her to birth" as a woman, and fits Ingeborg's seaward gaze. It carries the metaphysical weight of Sartre's "look," though its power leans toward conferring self, not toward eradicating it. The received "blink of an eye" seems too close to "nick of time," a "click" of time, reinforcing the dominance of clock time that Kierkegaard wants to combat.

Longing and Absent Love

The movie version of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* opens (more or less) with the cloaked silhouette of Meryl Streep gazing out over a stormy sea from the far end of a surf-strewn jetty.[2] It's a romantic image, the woman's gaze fastened toward infinity, her form stranded at the spot where sky and rock and ocean spray converge. The scene is ominous. Is she in danger? Is she defiant? Will she throw herself into the sea? We watch her watch, which becomes a kind of dark vigil, watched also by Jeremy Irons, an apparently sympathetic witness. If it comes to it, will he come rushing to her aid?

We take this in instantaneously, more or less. We interpret particulars, to be sure, but holistically, not in ordered series, and not deliberately – though our glance must be attentive. In this initial glancing apperception, particulars themselves seem to approach, reach out to bespeak the richness or poverty of a wider, more nearly universal story. We respond viscerally to the slipperiness of the spray-washed rocks and to the fearful death-shroud wrapping Streep's figure – then, as she turns, the hood now framing her face, we find her deep eyes piercing ours. So it is not just words that call out to us for interpretation.[3] There is apt attunement here between the readiness of imagination's eye – our eye – to be awakened and the readiness of portents to seek us out. If our receptive glance wakes up the world, the world wakes up our glance, as well. Eye and world dawn coupled in imagination's quick embrace.

What is this wider story intimated and waiting at a glance? We know, but darkly now. We want to see the life lived out forward, filled in backward. In a glance, we have the need, as viewers, for history to get on its way, to be given to us – though, mysteriously, we also know, in a glance, that history has already started, and know something of its direction. In a glance, we know we're *in medias res*, and underway. That is the hermeneutic stance, as Schleiermacher would have it, moving from particulars in their setting always already full of meaning to their wider, more inclusive import, a significance that embraces us in unanticipated community.[4]

Her face, Streep's face, reflects a longing, despair, and a hauntingly alien and attractive challenge. Perhaps it's courageous defiance. Whence comes her story?

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2 Why do I refer to "the opening (more or less)" of the film? If we had it in view, we'd see that the "opening" is announced as a "retake", a repetition, of an earlier opening. And before the "retake" begins, before Meryl Streep (or "Anna") mounts the jetty we see her eye in a mirror, held in an other's hand, the other glancing at her glancing in the glass. Both are preparing for her story to start (again). Any (or none) of these "moments" could mark the film's beginning. The jetty only becomes surf-strewn at the third shot (the second we actually see) of Streep at its extent. The film asks large Kierkegaardian questions: *When does a story begin? Why? Is its beginning always a retake, a repetition? Is time always recovered archeologically (Jeremy Irons's view, the film says)? Is every story staged (like this one)?*

3 An interpretative attention to things other than words, as Alastair Hannay points out, places Kierkegaard's interpretations outside the classical tradition of hermeneutics.

4 See Charles Larmore on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in *The Romantic Legacy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; and "Holderlin and Novalis," his contribution to Karl Ameriks, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 141-60.

Its source might be the infinite sadness of her eyes. But it might also sing from the far reach of her eyes. The mist of her eyes and the mist-bound offing mark the elusive limits, the horizons, from which her story will emerge. Her eye beseeches the impenetrable fog, which defines her waiting, disappointment, and defiance. We come to know that her look is fixed at the spot the French Lieutenant's ship slipped away over the edge of the world, leaving her bereft. The elusive spot searched by her deep eyes is the spot of her loss and the spot of her requital, should he reappear. But the dark of her cloak and the sky dash hope of love's return.

So starts her history, in the glance of our eye at the gaze of her eye. At a stroke, we have answered our question: history *can* start in the glance of an eye, in our glance at her gaze. And this rings true to *The Concept of Anxiety*. The horizon swept by Streep's longing eye begins to resemble the horizon of Kierkegaardian spirit. Her gaze lies infinitely distant at the far reach of her eye, and infinitely near, at the deep well of her eye. In the world of spirit, neither space nor time is metric, quantified. The extent of her suffering, laid out as the arc between eye and horizon, and as the arc between a past and future, is profound but immeasurable. Nautical miles or clock time miss the point.[5] Looking at her looking over the sea is looking at her soul. Her sea and consciousness merge indivisibly.

Grant this, and the space of interpretation and the space of spirit become vivid and commingled. The receptive-responsive imagination is confined neither to an external physical world nor to an internal psychic world. It appears non-dichotomous as between "inner" and " outer" space, and as between our engaging in a kind of willful projection of meanings on the world, and, alternatively, undergoing a kind

5 Thus "the blink of an eye" – which suggests a quickness – is not a helpful translation. See note 1 above. This is a place to comment on Heidegger's healthy "borrowing" of theme, insight, and language from Kierkegaard – in this case, his appropriation of *Øieblikket* (his *Augenblick*), which becomes part of his technical apparatus. In *Being and Time*, Robinson translation, p. 388, he writes: "The *Augenblick* ('moment of vision') permits us to encounter for the first time what can be 'in a time' as ready-to-hand or present-at-hand." Heidegger acknowledges his inspiration: "S. Kierkegaard is probably the one who has seen the *existentiell* phenomenon of the *Augenblick* with the most penetration . . ."(p. 497). Elsewhere we have the following, tracked down by Jack Caputo: "[Augenblick's importance is found] . . . in GA 29/30, pp 224-5 (the reference to SAK is on p. 225). He [Heidegger] says that with this concept SAK broke open the possibility of a new epoch of philosophy, but only the possibility, because today SAK has become a fashion that has removed us from what is decisive in Kierkegaardian philosophy. He interprets the moment as the moment in which Dasein is disclosed to itself in the *Blick der Entschlossenheit*. Rather like the moment of truth. This book has been translated under the title *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press), pp. 149-50" (personal communication). Dreyfus and Rubin argue that *Being and Time* is a version of Kierkegaard's "religiousness A" (pagan religiousness) in *Unscholarly Postscript*. See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, "You Can't Get Something for Nothing: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on How Not to Overcome Nihilism," *Inquiry*, 30, 1987, pp. 33-75. *A Literary Review* (formerly translated as *The Present Age*) is the place to look in Kierkegaard for Heidegger's "leveling," "the 'they'," (the crowd), and "chatter." The notions of repetition and angst; of *Dasein* as care and openness to otherness; of silence and appropriation; of resolute decisiveness, mood, and attunement; of temporality – all these (and others) are lifted directly from Kierkegaardian texts.

of subjection to meanings imposed by rules or force. Interpretation is free yet non-Promethean. As fundamentally receptive, responsive, interpreting creatures, we inhabit a space of spirit.

In the present case, as we awaken to our figure's seaward gaze, we are delivered up to the poetry of her world – as she delivers us up to the poetry of *ours*. We are joined in a community of mutual acknowledgment, of receiving and of giving meaning. Whether at last she is a figure of resignation, or of faith, or of tragedy, perhaps we cannot at present tell. But as the contours of her consciousness change for us, as we interpret, so will the contours of *our* responsive consciousness. There's a reciprocal recognition grounding our sense of time and spirit enacted here in the time of our interpretation. Her glance, somewhere between despair and faith, awaits understanding in the form of her Lieutenant's return from the edge of the world.

The Glance of Despair

"The glance," *Øieblikket*, the quick receptive-responsive scan of the eye, is a motif scattered throughout the Kierkegaardian authorship. It appears as a Sartrean stare or predatory gaze in *The Diary of the Seducer*, as Johannes anticipates his "construction" or "creation" of Cordelia – her history – through his strategies of catching her eye, her heart, in his unfaithful eye. Johannes Climacus, drawing on his cigar in Tivoli, sees the history of Copenhagen – or rather its absence – in the ambling undifferentiated flock passing before his glance, his bemused soon-to-become-reflective gaze.[6] Easily taking in their ease, he wonders how he can make trouble, start them on a path more difficult, more demanding. And in *The Concept of Anxiety* the motif of the glance (and its enigmatic link to history) appears explicitly, dialectically, as a term of art. The glance gathers up meaning pre-reflectively and synoptically and opens out from its quick receptive responsiveness toward more reflective interpretations, self-understandings, narratives, and finally, *enactments* – in a life infused by such interpretation.[7]

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis expands his cryptic link joining history to a glance. He alludes to a story strangely similar to the opening of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, to the fable of the princess Ingeborg, who is pictured looking seaward at the spot her lover, Frithiof, exiled by order of her brothers, sailed off the edge of the world. She knows her love will remain unrequited. Her glance toward the infinite horizon tells all, tells us that if (or when) Frithiof returns, she will have been unhappily married to another by her brothers, and she has no way of telling this to him. She awaits a repetition, a reconfiguration of her self-understanding and of her place in her world. Can she survive not telling Frithiof? Will her love for him endure even as she is unhappily married to another – or will it wither? The watchman of Copenhagen watches her sea-watch, waiting.[8]

These two remarkable images – of Meryl Streep and Ingeborg gazing seaward – open into dramas of absent and impossible love. We are thrown into the midst of

6 *CUP*, p. 185.

7 I discuss "enactment" in Chapters Nine and Ten.

8 *Concept of Anxiety*, Thomte, p. 87.

unfolding lives, thrown into poetic participation in the unfolding of those incomplete sentences, partial paragraphs, glimpses of stories, enactments that make up these lives – already underway, never to be finished.

Unrequited love blocks or freezes these two lives. To be requited would be to meet repetition, to recover love anew. But unrequited love is not all that freezes life. Death, too, brings a halt to life. Uncannily, however, it can also be the start of life, of history. In *Fragments*, Climacus confides that death is his lovely dancing partner, the partner, we might say, who gives him life.[9] And in a story from *Stages on Life's Way*, a glance of recognition puts a walker face to face with death – which paradoxically starts him on toward life.

The Glance of a Corpse

Frater Taciturnus tells us a story not quite the same as Meryl Streep's or Ingeborg's.[10] The silent brother from *Stages on Life's Way* has a different fable to link the glance and history. Here the eye is riveted in recognition.

Taciturnus has us accompany a nightwalker making his way among the shadows along the banks of the Seine. He does not gaze toward an infinite horizon hopelessly awaiting an unlikely love, or grieving an impossible one. The nightwalker is a reformed gambler. His eye prowls the Seine's embankments, under bridges, under gas-lit streets. It catches figures dragging up a body from the river's edge. Some unfortunate has thrown himself from a bridge. But not just *any* unfortunate. We watch our walker startle into recognition. His eye has caught the frozen eye of an old gambling friend. His receptive glance is riveted in fright. Responsively, as we might say, his own life reels before his eyes as if this were its concluding scene. Our eyes, his eyes, are plunged reciprocally in history, in the artistry of interpretative self-unfolding.

Until the moment of his glance, our ex-gambler had assumed his friend was of superior composure, not at all besotted, and not at all the sort to throw himself into the Seine. At a glance, this assurance evaporates. Captured by the stare of death, he must recast his own life, his own story, as he might tell it to himself. In a glance, his life is stripped bare, awaiting anything, awaiting repetition. He was mistaken that his friend had a secure hold on life, yet he depended on that assurance. Now he must reconstruct the certitudes of his *own* life. His recognition of the corpse is the recognition that his friend could not defeat a gambling curse, and the recognition that his own life might also slip into the Seine. In the glance of an eye, history begins – must begin.

For reasons quite other than those of Meryl Streep or Ingeborg, but just as urgently, he needs repetition, a new start to life, a start of history, of human temporality. He needs the time, the narrative story, in which death's word is not the last. He

9 *Fragments*, p. 8.

10 *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 477f.

needs relief from another's draining glance, needs a point where history once more begins.[11]

Repetition, Longing, Need and Gift

These texts or stories establish an intuitive context for understanding the *need* of repetition, which is to be distinguished from its *gift*.[12] For the gift, we can only be thankful. The need, on the other hand, can leave us hanging, for there are no human plans or subtle devices for acquiring repetition. Its unexpected, surprise appearance occasions gratitude and joy, but there's no self-congratulatory pride in its accomplishment. It's not a human doing in its receptive phase, but a reality bestowed.

Constantine Constantius, author of *Repetition*, can claim its gift is a "wonder at the border of the transcendent" precisely because of the awful intensity of prior need that it relieves.[13] In the Kierkegaardian scheme of things, this primal need appears in four guises. There's the moment of longing, sometimes a hopeless wait, sometimes a hopeful one. Second, there's the moment of facing death's inescapability. Third, there is the moment of resignation, where one suffers both the ache of loss and the recognition that, on natural accounts, repetition is impossible for this natural life. And then there is the fourth phase, a phase of "happy need." This is the moment of faith. One paradoxically suffers resignation of the hope for repetition on human terms, and simultaneously delights in the expectation, held on the strength of the absurd, that repetition is nonetheless a possibility in this mortal life.

These moments of need for repetition have their classic expositions in texts outside the short narratives we've been exploring.[14] Nevertheless, we might try to fit our present narratives to repetition's phases. Whatever degree of faith or despair Streep or Ingeborg may harbor, we catch in the glance of unrequited love primarily the need of repetition, not celebration at its grant. Meryl Streep may be a figure of longing *and* resignation. Ingeborg may embody faith, believing, like Abraham, that her Isaac will be returned; or perhaps she resides in resignation or despair, taking Frithiof's absence to be akin to death. Akin to, but perhaps not as sharply focused as, our nightwalker's glance at the fixed eye of death, Ingeborg and Streep see an infinite loss at the place their lovers vanish. But their eyes are still fixed on love, even in its absence – not on certain death.

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11 I've followed Eriksen here, both in focusing on the nightwalker's story and in the wide interpretation he gives of repetition. See Eriksen, *Kierkegaard's Repetition*, and my review, "Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition," *Kierkegaard Newsletter*, March, 2002, pp. 6-9.

12 See Chapter Nine below, a revision of "Repetition: Getting the World Back," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

13 *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 185.

14 Kierkegaard's retelling of Abraham and Isaac is the retelling of loss and hope for return "on the strength of the absurd."

The gambler recognizes death – not love – in the stare of the corpse. The glance riveted by the stare of death marks the most desperate need of repetition – perhaps too numb even to know itself. In each case, a glance reveals a need, a need of history, of a new start at figuring a history. The shock of death or of love lost generates the need for new beginnings. Our first gestures toward poetic response *to* that need have their origin in imagination's receptive, fertile glance.

What, more fully, could we now say, *not* about the need, but rather about the *gift* of repetition? First, the gift is unprompted, an uncaused occasion, we might say. It presupposes relinquishing all attempts to earn or attain repetition. Second, this new start unfolds as responsive passion, not as a project whose goals are set explicitly. In business there may be plans to construct and follow out. But contra Rawls, there are no life-plans in this region. Third, there is the sense that it is reality's turn to speak: virtues of humility and listening and receptivity come to the fore. These aspects are consolidated in a fourth. In sensing the need for our entangled history to achieve a new start, we sense that the *satisfaction* of this need is a matter of hope and trust. Keeping this hope alive is a matter of faith, especially when its satisfaction seems to defy all natural expectations. If the hope for satisfaction cannot be kept alive, the need quickly turns perverse, turns bitterly upon itself. Rather than await love and life, it disdains and disowns both. One feels only an absurd futility at the center of one's lack – not the hope, the faith, that it might be answered.

The contours of the inexplicable gift of repetition are etched in the contours of our excruciating need. If the frozen eye of a corpse drains all life from any who behold it, encountering a face of unwavering eternal love bequeaths life to any who behold it. But we know this sadly, chiefly, through our lack. At least this seems to be the tone of our author's dialectical works – *Postscript*, *Anxiety*, *Sickness unto Death*. In these works, Kierkegaard intimates that a divinely granted instance of "the glance" as "history's beginning" is best approached from the margins, from sites of need and emptiness – from the glance of unrequited love, or a sharp encounter with the stare of death.

Reflexive Recognition

It's worth noting that there is a dialectical, formal feature of the glance awaiting repetition, or the glance with power to collapse our lives. What occurs in "the glance" is the kind of mutual reflexive recognition that we find spelled out in the early parts of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – for example, in the scenario called "the struggle of life and death" that precedes the "master-slave" scenario.

The basic idea is that I become who I am as I recognize that the recognition that another accords to me is essential to my survival and my worth. Whether I flourish or falter is a function of the glance of another. I become a person of love as my glance takes in the glance of another who looks on me in love. A child knows she can love as she is recognized as a being capable of love and knows she is an "object of love" in the eyes of her parents. I am, from the start, dependent on the grounding power

of another – in this case, not the Other Anti-Climacus has in mind as grounding our self-relation, but necessarily *another*, nonetheless.[15]

If I am right about this mutually reflexive recognition as the basis for the gathering of a self into its rich temporal unfolding, then we have a wider philosophical framework, albeit a roughly Hegelian one, for interpreting "the glance" and its role as a start of history. This framework could focus the self, whether it is then unfolded in roughly secular terms, or in terms aligned religiously. There is ample mutual incomprehension between those who occupy a stance that sees some promise in a Kierkegaardian unfolding of a "self before God," a self under the eye of an abiding love, and, alternatively, those who reject such a stance. Nevertheless, there are common lines of sight. These encourage dialogue on this culturally sidelined question – does Kierkegaard have much to add after Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche?

One such common line of sight is the painful realization that love is experienced most sharply in its absence. Another is the ease of our deflection from our own mortality. A third is the embrace of our status as self-interpreting creatures, and the accompanying thought that receptive, responsive hermeneutical imagination is not opposed to understanding our reality. It's essential to our lives, not mere window decoration. A final common line of sight might be that love, especially love we know through lack, reveals our deepest need as persons; and the answer to that deepest need is unmixed recognition bestowed through another's gaze.[16] The point of certain contest is whether that source of self and worth is always already available.

Untimely Coda

We have the bare beginning of an answer now to our double question: how "the glance" starts history and how it fits in with repetition. The pieces are laid out. Both the glance and repetition invade clock and suffered time as a light arising from the eternal that is equal to our need.[17] However illusory or unlikely this repair may seem from an "objective" or "natural" standpoint, it is definitive of Kierkegaardian

15 For a provocative exploration of our dependence on others, see Robert Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, and my review, "What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One's Own," *Inquiry*, 45(3), 2002, pp. 331-50. If the paths of Ingeborg or Streep were to unwind Christianly, their outward glance, initially a longing for one departed, would at last be requited, met by transforming love. Absence of the beloved, in Christian terms, triggers the need for faith, and if faith is the faith that for God nothing is impossible, one might in faith hold that love would always be requited, against all natural odds.

16 This deepest need, we might say, is tacit, veiled as we go about our daily business. Yet it surfaces unmistakably as Streep returns to the jetty, scanning the horizon, or as our night walker is startled into mortal fright.

17 Christianly conceived, the glance arises "from eternity," from a source not *of* time precisely because it *gives* time – time as human temporality fit to fill a human life with spirit, light and dark. The gambler's startled, anxious recognition of his mortality would be repaired in a hopeful repetition. Christianly framed, his glance would be met by a glance from "beyond" the dead that would mark an influx of eternal meaning, as in the love-filled gaze of Christ. His being would be "grounded in Another."

faith that such repair is a possibility – for now but dimly glimpsed, but glimpsed nonetheless. Glimpsed, as we might say, in a glance that starts and grounds a life.[18]

The *need* for beginnings is the need to reconfigure and be transfigured. The glance gives access not only to the need, but to the gift of repetition, and as such, gives concurrent access to time's threefold fullness. As meaning intersects the present, the glance recedes toward origins, and proceeds to gather in the future from its uncanny open possibilities. These glimpsed memories and dark or hopeful expectancies can then be opened to a present where one hears the start of story, and can move responsively toward its full interpretation – which means its rich enactment, as life and story become as one in a hopeful repetition. Christianly framed, a glance is met by a glance from beyond the dead that marks an influx of eternal meaning, as in the love-filled gaze of a Christ: one's becoming thus "grounded in another".

18 Rick Furtak cites a parallel between Kierkegaard's flash of recognition leading to a retelling of the past and the well-known writing of Proust on lost and unrequited time. He paraphrases Ricoeur's account as holding that "the retelling of past events makes possible a moment of insight in which one perceives the whole story of one's life as the invisible history of a vocation." Furtak's note is on p. 166 of *Wisdom in Love*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, and cites Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 2:84, 2:31-32.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Either/Or: Perils in Polarity: Crossing the Aesthetic-Ethical Divide

a polemic against truth as
[detached] knowledge.
– Postscript on *Either/Or*

Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 opening account of *Either/Or* in *After Virtue* brought Kierkegaard to center stage in a narrative of moral theory written well within the mainstream of English-speaking philosophy.[1] MacIntyre's picture of *Either/Or* and Kierkegaard has been quite influential, but I think it falls short.[2] Showing how and why it does brings Kierkegaard's double masterpiece into better light. We come to see how it displays aspects of the interplay between the aesthetic and the ethical that have been generally overlooked. That double and endlessly restarting book does far more than pit a successful and loquacious civil servant, Judge Wilhelm against a silent, nameless poet we've come to know as "the aesthete," or "A."

Polarity and Equipollence

The opening passages of *After Virtue* lay out MacIntyre's sense of imminent moral collapse, a crisis forewarned in Kierkegaard's *A Literary Review (Two Ages)* and *Attack on Christendom*. In tracing out the contours of disappearing moral space, he maintains a tone of crisis mixed with a somewhat desperate flicker of hope that moral

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. If one counts his entry "Kierkegaard," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, New York: The Free Press, 1967, then MacIntyre's first account of Kierkegaard is pushed back another decade. But here he made no attempt to define Kierkegaard as a pivotal figure in Western moral philosophy. See also MacIntyre's "Breaking the Chains of Reason," in E. P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy*, introduced by E.P. Thompson, London: Stevens and Sons, 1960.

2 MacIntyre has come to disown this account, apparently partially in light of criticisms in my *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Routledge, 1996. See his preface to the second edition of *A Short History of Ethics*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, and his final remarks in John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, Chicago: Open Court Press, 2001. MacIntyre comes to revise a too-narrow conception of reason in later work. Amartya Sen reminds us that Hume and Adam Smith were Enlightenment critics of 'Enlightenment Reason'. See his "East and West: The Reach of Reason," *The New York Review of Books*, July 20, 2000.

resources lost as Western Europe marched from feudal times through Enlightenment to modernity might be yet renewed, restored – if not by a Kierkegaardian "repetition," then by other unspecified means. MacIntyre uses a technique for diagnosis we can call "polarity," a technique that lays out confrontations that leave the hope for resolution at grave risk.[3] It bears comparison with Kierkegaard's procedures.

In the *Postscript*, Climacus counters a Hegel-like position, and in *Either/Or* the Judge disarms "A." Climacus, the Jutland Priest, Abraham, and Socrates undermine Judge Wilhelm's apparently solid standing. Anti-Climacus, at least by title, counters Climacus. These polarities create a destabilizing effect, where positions seem to be endlessly undermined by their dialectical opposites. Of course, there is much more in Kierkegaard's tool kit than creating polarities. He uses humor, irony, and plenty of old-fashioned critical analysis. But the idea of destabilizing our comfortable orientations through letting apparently opposed positions mutually undermine each other seems to be an important aspect of his work. This can be unsettling, especially if it comes to seem that Kierkegaard's parade of initially attractive but ultimately doomed life-options might in fact represent a morally frivolous exhibit, a largely "aesthetic" project, a brilliant intellectual display that, in the last analysis, is only theatrical.

It's no accident that MacIntyre picks the contest between Judge Wilhelm and an aesthete to open the drama he sees as Enlightenment reason's defeat. Like Kierkegaard, he presents a surprising number of mutually destructive polar oppositions to depict the landscape in decay. We have "mesmeric dichotomies."[4] "Nietzsche or Aristotle" marks a central pivot. He opens with the impossible polarity "Judge Wilhelm or the aesthete." In a parody of polarity, *After Virtue*'s final chapter is headed "Trotsky *and* St. Benedict."

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3 If each position is poised to cancel its opposite, if no clear superiority of one over the other emerges, and if no third alternative is proposed, then we have ingredients for moral collapse. Forcing existential oppositions resembles Hegel's more spectatorial and developmental approach in which we observe from a safe distance a new historical or philosophical perspective develop through conflict with its precedents. It also resembles a strategy of ancient skepticism. Kant employs it in the *First Critique*. A thesis about the beginning of the universe or about human freedom is countered by an equally persuasive argument for its opposite. Since each alternative undermines its opposite, both thesis and antithesis become all but vacuous. A skilled speaker can construct a position that effectively counters anything entering the arena of debate. This can induce an interminable cycle of moves and counter-moves that shows the ineffectuality of reason to settle a case. If our moral-cultural options are as extreme as MacIntyre has it, we may feel forced to choose, yet also moved to vacate discussion altogether on the grounds we've been shown the plausibility of a general moral skepticism.

4 See Phillip Pettit's article "Liberal or Communitarian: MacIntyre's Mesmeric Dichotomy," in John Horton and Susan Mendes, eds, *After MacIntyre*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994. The haunting opposition of Trotsky and John Maynard Keynes appears in an essay from the collection aptly titled "Out of Apathy".

Reason and Will

The lesson MacIntyre draws from the standoff between "A" and Judge Wilhelm is that resolution based on reason is impossible. Different things *matter* in their perspectives. There is no common principle both parties could appeal to for resolution of differences. Since neither skepticism nor indecision can be sustained, we're forced to choose without criteria – choose the criteria of choice, as it were. MacIntyre thus finds Kierkegaard to be the inventor of Sartre's existential "radical choice."

Though it captures something of the malaise that permeates large parts of contemporary culture, I don't think this sketch is true to Kierkegaard.[5] Radical voluntarism is not an inevitable consequence of a deteriorating moral landscape. An epistemological impasse – can we really *know* anything like moral truth? – does not lead inevitably to a doctrine of radical choice. This transition comes naturally to Sartre, and, I suspect, to inhabitants of a liberal consumerist culture that places unbounded confidence in free choice.[6] There's something immensely attractive in the notion of a triumphant and heroic autonomous will, and I suspect its appeal grows as the actual scope of effective moral-political will becomes progressively diminished.[7] But Kierkegaard *rejects* this affirmation of an unfettered will.

Valorization of will assumes its transparency, assumes that we know what we choose when we choose, and that the will is, as it were, under our control. This overlooks the ways that Hegel and Schopenhauer, not to mention Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, have questioned what becomes the liberal assumption of a transparent individual will. And of course the Augustinian tradition frankly denies transparency and autonomy to the will. Kierkegaard's taxonomy of despair, laid out in *Sickness Unto Death*, denies that the will operates in its own interest, that it is a reliable executive of the needs and desires of the self, that it is transparent and responsive to reason, that the main obstacles to its effectuality are external, placed in environmental or social or political structures. He denies that the mind's having determined what is good, then the will moves seamlessly toward achieving it. The Enlightenment

5 Other critiques of MacIntyre's reading of *Either/Or* are found in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or*, *II*, Athens, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, and in Davenport and Rudd, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*.

6 See "Self-Choice and Self-Reception: Judge Wilhelm's Admonition" Chapter Two in my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*. You might grant that in a fragmented, emotivist culture we have no criteria for deciding between competing moral life-views or practices and yet refuse the option of radical choice. You could fall into unreflective conventionalism, or, like ancient skeptics, cultivate moral agnosticism and *apatheia*. You could follow frankly non-rational action-guides, unconcerned by the consequences, and refuse to valorize that path as one of exercising freedom or radical choice. You might drift in a sea of despair, despair of will and despair of knowledge. Passion, autonomous will, and freedom might all be disabled, radical choice playing no part at all.

7 Iris Murdoch detects this link between downsized reason and upscaled will in both existentialist and liberal theories of the self. See *The Sovereignty of Good*, New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1970. This link also appears in postmodern views that accord readers unlimited interpretative freedom.

hope was that blinders removed, good outcomes follow. Thus first on its agenda is a critique of the authority of tradition, Church, feudal lords and kings.

For Kierkegaard, this employment of critique leaves out an essential task of reason, which is to uncover its own limitations, to find and abide its own defeat. Kierkegaard accepts post-Kantian cognitive humility and joins it to pre-modern volitional humility, recalling will from its more grandiose pretensions. *Fear and Trembling*, *Postscript*, *Fragments*, and *Sickness unto Death* cut back the *expansionist*, *self-willed aims* of an idealist or romantic or even rationalist philosophical-intellectual culture. Wilhelm humbles the exaggerated conceits of the aesthete. Abraham is humbled before God. His ordeal should humble a self-satisfied Judge Wilhelm. The *Postscript* notions of the absurd and the paradox confound our intellect, but also our sense of self-sufficient will. *Sickness unto Death* identifies *a defiant will* – not ignorance – as the culprit keeping us from redeeming good. Volitional humility would place us religiously "before God" – a measure, or standard, that brings down self-aggrandizement.[8]

There's much more to Kierkegaard's critique than "humbling the will" or "valuing pre-modern volitional humility." But this focus can expose his aim in staging the confrontation between Judge Wilhelm and his friend. An inflated will denies both its dependence on others and its darkness to itself. Quieting the will, for Kierkegaard, is of a piece with cognitive critique. For the Greek skeptic, cognitive critique partially disables the will in order to usher in a quiet *apatheia*. For a Christian, an abdication of the presumptions of an unencumbered will allows placement before God. This abdication of an heroically assertive or declamatory will ushers in a quiet even as an undaunted interest in the good – an "infinite interest," in Kierkegaard's account – remains.

Cross-sphere Dialogue

For MacIntyre, *Either/Or* exemplifies a radical break with rationality and sets the stage for the malaise of modern skeptical emotivism. Don't we assume that *Either/Or* is about *choice*, a judicious one that Judge Wilhelm delivers to the wayward aesthete from the bench of reason, prudence, and experience? But, for MacIntyre, the idea is not that the Judge makes the better, reasonable, case – the case we all ought to heed – but that Kierkegaard creates a standoff between the Judge and the aesthete that gives *no advantage* to the virtues of reason, prudence, or civic standing. This standoff creates a crisis. Reasons undercut each other, leaving only blind choice.

Abandoned without moral guidance, the reader is forced to make a Sartrean, irrational choice, a leap in faith and desperation. For MacIntyre, that is where "we" all stand today. But this isn't true to Kierkegaard. *Sickness Unto Death* shows the will to be anything but a simple mechanism we can call on for explosive stage-leaps. And there is ample evidence that Wilhelm does *not* picture the will in a stance of radical, Sartrean choice. The aesthete must "choose the ethical," as he puts it, but the Judge also warns that this choice is not "identical with creating myself." The

8 See George Pattison, "'Before God' as a Regulative Concept," in Niels Cappelhørn and Herman Deuser, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998.

individual does not "have absolute power to make himself into what it [merely] *please[s]* him to be" and "does not become someone other than he was before, but becomes himself."[9] We can't get ethics just by choice. And reasons play a substantial part, so I'll argue, in the shift from an aesthetic to an ethical way of life.[10]

The MacIntyre of *After Virtue* writes as if each life-sphere were hermetically sealed from every other, with no effective moral communication or evaluation possible across spheres. Because a judgment is always made from within the local sphere of a person's life, MacIntyre thinks that it cannot make a legitimate demand on someone living within another sphere. On this view, the aesthete will be deaf to the demands that the Judge sees as integral to the ethical life. I don't think that the aesthete suffers from this disability. But an additional consequence of MacIntyre's reading is that he thinks that as readers, as *observers* of this putative standoff between existence spheres, we should picture *ourselves* as without footholds in either aesthetic or ethical life. Why is this required?

MacIntyre believes (mistakenly) that *Kierkegaard* wants us positioned in mid-air, as it were, without rooted intuitions about the two "spheres" that Kierkegaard presents. I suspect that he takes choice from such an "unencumbered," "detached" position to be paradigmatic for practical reasoning. But the gears of moral reasoning can't engage if we adopt the position of complete outsiders alienated from the appeals of either the ethical or the aesthetic perspective. And the capacities we have for subtle readings – even if we're not in a stance of practical reasoning – can't engage if we're disarmed in this way. Such utter detachment leaves us staring in blank moral ignorance. It *guarantees* that we'll look in vain for a basis from which to choose one way of life over the other. But admission to the chambers of good reading or of effective deliberation can't require that we check everything essential at the door.

MacIntyre assumes that reasoning requires, roughly speaking, a disinterested appeal to universal principles legitimated without reference to our local commitments or particular passions. But why assume that we need access to such independent

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9 *Either/Or*, Vol. II, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press p. 217, 260 (my emphasis) and 177. I discuss Judge Wilhelm vacillating between picturing the will as option-selective and as non-choosing-but-receptive in Chapter Two of *Selves in Discord and Resolve*.

10 As we have noted, MacIntyre's view of the power (and impotence) of reason has evolved, so it may seem unfair to give only secondary attention to the two important books that appear subsequent to *After Virtue – Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988 and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, The Gifford Lectures, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. This subsequent writing is not so pessimistic about reason's effectiveness in moral dialogue, and gives us a better grip on *Either/Or* than *After Virtue* provides. Apparently my critique in *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (which the present chapter expands considerably) went some way toward leading MacIntyre to revise his early sketch of *Either/Or.* But staying with the view of *After Virtue* lets us focus on a view of Kierkegaard dominant among non-Kierkegaard specialists that needs correcting. It also lets us focus on a counter-Enlightenment view of reason that is vaguely tied to relativist, emotivist, and "post-modern" presumptions, and whose core is laid out in *After Virtue*. Finally, staying with *After Virtue*'s account of reason's collapse makes MacIntyre's later views all the more appealing.

principles, or that, lacking them, that commitments are ineffective as deliberative reasons? Why should encountering an opponent I can't convince lead me to suppose that *my* convictions are no longer full-fledged moral concerns, only an expression of personal taste? Conversation about why the aesthete should (or shouldn't) adopt the Judge's point of view isn't blocked just because their life-spheres seem to have no overlap (a very implausible view), or just because they don't seem to share commitment to an overarching principle.

There is a plausible alternative to this disheartening view of moral reasoning. It's a roughly Aristotelian picture that begins to be developed by MacIntyre himself in *Whose Justice*, *Which Rationality*? and in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. Taking a broadly neo-Aristotelian view of deliberation, we might see a sustained moral discussion between "A" and the Judge. They might share moral concepts, for instance "pleasure," "happiness," or "despair." If these terms are sufficiently intelligible to each to permit a functional exchange, then their intelligibility ought to allow dialogue and moral growth. All this is compatible with allowing that the salience or interpretation of these terms will shift between the Judge's world and "A"'s.

Can "A" sense the different slant the Judge has placed on terms of moral assessment? If so, he can sense features of the angle that the Judge assumes, step in his shoes, as it were, just as the Judge shows that he can depict features of the angle on the moral world that the aesthete assumes. We'd expect that the weight of the Judge's viewpoint could gradually dawn on the aesthete. Whether or not he finally adopted the Judge's stance, he'd have the capacity to do so, the capacity for moral learning, the capacity to become familiar and at home with something that at first is unfamiliar. He could expand his moral vocabulary, and gain a new appreciation of his old evaluative words. He could gain new ways of seeing and responding.

There are several reasons to shift from MacIntyre's original view of moral impasse toward this more Aristotelian account. For one, his denial that a moral exchange occurs between the Judge and "A" runs counter to some straightforward features of the text. The second volume of *Either/Or* is written out as the letters of a Judge to a poet-essayist whose work we have read in Volume I. The framing intention of the Judge's letters is to persuade – morally persuade – the young aesthete, his friend, of the inadequacy of his poetic, bachelor life. Kierkegaard is not writing an impersonal moral tract but a personal communication, a confidential set of pleas and warnings and extended reflections from one friend to another. Neither the Judge nor Kierkegaard claims that deliberation is impossible, and the surface of the text seems straightforwardly to give us a picture of *deliberation in progress.*

Either/Or creates a context of moral dialogue, a space where specific moral-religious-aesthetic encounter takes place.[11] This means that cross-sphere intelligibility and cross-sphere evaluation are alive in this morally modulated conversational

11 Martin Buber, Sartre, and Adorno launched the distorted picture of Kierkegaardian figures as essentially asocial and self-enclosed, a view which neglects the massive fact of dialogue among the figures, as well as the fact that many of Kierkegaard's figures have rich social lives.

field.[12] To accept *After Virtue*'s picture, we'd have to believe that the Judge's letters are not to be read by "A," or that "A" cannot grasp the general shape of the Judge's appeal, or that on *a priori* grounds he can never learn anything from the Judge – that our aesthete can barely comprehend a word of what the Judge is offering.

But crediting the evidence, the Judge admonishes "A" (and "A" no doubt knows this). As the Judge sees it, the aesthete pursues only fleeting pleasures. Why not venture that "A" is probably aware , at some level, of this fact? Perhaps "A" feels exactly the despair the Judge detects. The Judge escapes this despair through married life and its stability. Do we assume that "A" has no inkling that this is a piece of moral suasion? If "A" finds the Judge's admonitions and his sketch of married life intelligible, then the Judge will have provided a nest of cross-sphere reasons that "A" can ponder according to his own lights. And, as readers, we can ponder their bearing on "A" and also on our own lives. If there is no impartial position from which to assess these reasons offered to "A," this means that the position from which assessment is undertaken will be *somewhat* engaged, and the assements tentative, open to correction and revision. They might be comparative (x seems better than y) rather than absolute or conclusive. But why make such tentative inconclusiveness a *defect* of one's assessment? We'd look for features of a life – freedom, or security, say – that crossed through both life-spheres, and take their comparative weight. We'd be seeking an intuitive grasp of relative total weight, bearing this way or that, overall. We'd look for a contextual "better or worse" rather than a timeless "right or wrong."

While avoiding the sort of absolute judgment he might have to make from the bench, and speaking friend to friend, the Judge might be saying to the aesthete: "Here's the best case I can make for your adopting a *radical* change in your life. I've tried to address your cares and needs as best I can. Consider how a different sort of life might mitigate your hopelessness. You may not see things this way, but I speak as a friend who has your best interests at heart. If not today, perhaps at a later time you may remember what I've said."[13]

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12 The view of practical reason implicit in Kierkegaard is described by Stephen Mulhall as follows:

> [W]hen one party to a moral debate presents her reasons for advocating a certain transition [from one standpoint to another], she should do so in a manner which acknowledges the personal experiential and intuitional roots of her argument. If she were to present them as impersonally decisive, the form of her discourse would imply a belief that pure logic dictates a certain perspective on the issue at hand, when the reality of the matter is that the adoption or rejection of any ethical stance is a personal decision, an existential act, the responsibility for which one cannot avoid by sloughing it off onto logic.

Mulhall, "Sources of the Self's Sense of Itself: The Making of a Theistic Reading of Modernity," in D.Z. Phillips, ed., *Can Religion be Explained?*, London: Metheun, 1997.

13 This attempt by the Judge to offer an "internal critique" of the aesthete's position illustrates MacIntyre's claim, in *Three Rival Versions*, that inquiry can advance when one contesting party offers a critique of its competitor in terms that the competitor, from her own

If "A" is unmoved by the Judge, that does not mean no dialogue is possible, or that one hasn't happened, or that reason has been impotent. Reason can slow "A" down and make him think, even if he's not, at last, persuaded. Down the road, things may appear differently. Moral reflection is initiated by the Judge, but doesn't necessarily end with the Judge's opening comments. "A" could be evaluating the Judge's evaluation. He could have a counter-argument in his pocket. We are not given his specific response to the Judge. But were the aesthete to respond, he could draw on a considerable overlap in their terms of appraisal. For example, "A" might agree that he pursues only fleeting pleasures, but remain unconvinced that the Judge has produced a viable alternative. Perhaps all pleasure just *is* ephemeral.

The text seems to show a mid-point in moral deliberation that's underway. It shows, first, that something counts as robust moral dialogue even in cases where resolution is not immediately available (as in the case of the conflict between the Judge and the aesthete). Second, it suggests that where differences in evaluation occur, there is no presumption that recourse to an "independent rational third party," or an "independently grounded rational principle," or a moral "super-framework" is desirable or necessary in order to negotiate differences. Third, the failure of either party to convince the other in such a dispute doesn't show that no legitimate moral communication has taken place – that is, that all we have is an animated exchange of preferences or tastes. Fourth, conflict and agreement can vary in degree. Fifth, "A" and the Judge (not to mention third-party readers or observers) will enter the arena of deliberation with some moral opinions, reasons, and standards already in place. Why should this fact disqualify our entry – unless we hold to an extravagant (and barely intelligible) hope for adjudication free of relevant commitments and passions? Sixth, moral learning can take place, so there's hope that "A" might gather insight from the Judge's admonitions, and the Judge might learn something from "A". Overall, this alternative view of moral reasoning appears inherently more plausible than MacIntyre's *After Virtue* position, and also manages to stay closer to the spirit and the text of *Either/Or*.[14]

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angle, can recognize as her own. This permits (but does not guarantee) that a critique can be decisive, unreservedly successful.

14 What accounts for the deep appeal of a view that puts two parties to a moral conflict in an intractable stalemate? There's nothing unfamiliar about moral standoffs where neither party listens to the other: why should the present case be an exception? Second, there's an analogy between the case of moral conflict and the Kuhnian idea of incommensurability between contrasting conceptual spheres. In Kuhn's well-known view, reasons cannot mediate the gap between radically contrasting scientific views. We are left powerless to show that later views, say those in place *after* a revolution in physics, are an improvement on earlier, now discarded views. Third, the widespread idea that moral judgments are subjective, personal, and can't be "imposed" on others may work to make an ultimate moral standoff in this case seem plausible. Then there is a behavioral consideration: Kierkegaard fails to give us "A"'s reaction to the Judge, so we assume that Wilhelm's pleas don't get through. We become inclined to the view that neither "A" nor the Judge can breach the other's persuasion-resistant shield. But perhaps the aesthete doesn't discard the Judge's reasoning utterly, but is insufficiently moved to alter his views or change his life. Then he *does* feel the weight of the Judge's reasons: they're just not weighty enough. A fifth factor might be the all-or-nothing view that if a reason doesn't

Reader's Will and Reason

By their relative interpretative engagement or detachment, and scholarly or personal inclinations (things partly subject to the will), readers can play a role in the construction of the impasse between "A" and the Judge – or in brokering a resolution. The text of *Either/Or* leaves a swath open to interpretation, ample space to insert the "slant" that's needed to keep the standoff resolute – or malleable. The lesson is not that Kierkegaard's text can be exploited to say just anything at all, nor that the author has no preferred way of reading *Either/Or*. We said earlier that MacIntyre wants us, as readers, to hover mid-air without roots in the world either of the Judge or of the aesthete. And I suggested that Kierkegaard's point *wasn't* to leave us as reader-observers forever hovering there. The letters from the Judge are intended to grip us "existentially," but that doesn't mean they're intended to incapacitate our moral sensibilities. There's a more complex lesson here about the attraction and danger of interpretative freedom. Kierkegaard knows our readiness to enter this interpretative arena, and creates his fascinating labyrinth knowing we'll be drawn in. Nevertheless he thinks we're also courting danger and must be *warned.* This arena isn't just a captivating playground.

Kierkegaard sees us all too comfortable in a decision-adverse, passionless culture where we'd defer a choice between two lives as different, as radically contrasting (and yet in certain lights *appealing*) as the aesthete's and Wilhelm's.[15] We'd rather maintain a roughly equal balance in appeal. That would satisfy a shadowy desire to remain neutral, undecided.[16] The tensions would stay seductive, fascinating, "very interesting." If Kierkegaard exploits our desire to remain neutral, merely "interested" observers, it's probably for a moral end. And that end – in proper Kantian fashion

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defeat its competitors outright, then it has no weight at all. These thoughts might slant our perceptions toward the conclusion that the impasse between Judge Wilhelm and "A" can't be broken by dialogue or moral learning. Shielding us from "A"'s response to the Judge's letters lets Kierkegaard push a reader to make her own reading of the contest. Kierkegaard does not rush to resolve it for us. This augments our free participation in a comparative evaluation of the Judge's and "A"'s positions and lets Kierkegaard escape the charge that he's rigged the encounter to come out as a one-sided victory – a victory, say, for the Judge.

15 Some aspects of "A"'s "moral character" may be unappealing to the Judge, but apparently "A"'s conversational skills, tact, imagination, loyalty, and decency are appealing enough to the Judge to sustain friendship between them, and to keep him welcome at the Judge's home.

16 I can imagine a scholarly and cultural context where we would be soothed into complacency by a text that presented frank one-sidedness in its polemic, rather than simulated equipollence. In this hypothetical context, we might imagine the Judge portrayed as far-and-away ("one-sidedly") superior to the aesthete. This would allow these differently placed readers to revel comfortably in his victory. But for Kierkegaard's broadly educated, "tolerant," and "interested" audience, one-sidedness is *not* the dominant form of complacency: neutrality strikes closer to the mark. So Kierkegaard makes his entrance playing to this neutrality-slant. The fact that this apparent "standoff" is less a defense of neutrality than a provocation to us to test our commitments only slowly dawns on us. Kierkegaard exposes his own one-sided passion only at a considerably later date. For the moment, he gives his audience what it enjoys. We are first lured into his net, our complacency soothed – then shattered.

– is to expose to criticism our "natural inclinations." We're naturally inclined toward neutrality.

Beyond arousing our interested amusement in a scholarly conundrum, Kierkegaard would entice us with this (apparent) standoff in order to let us savor freedom, but just as important, in order to have us swallow the bad moral taste that attaches to a voyeur's stance. A life that only satisfies the natural inclination to look and peer is not a fully human life. Freedom from engagement gives space for interpretation, but it's also morally important *not* to hover indefinitely in irresolution. The apparent standoff – if we yield to its allure – forces us initially into the position of aesthetes. We're given a taste of the *stain* of irresolution. When (and if) this stain becomes sufficiently repulsive, Kierkegaard's subsequent aim comes into play. He wishes to lure our will *away* from irresolution toward commitment. The *Postscript* bears out this interpretation:

> That there is no conclusion and no final decision [in *Either/Or]* is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way [is] perhaps a polemic against truth as [detached] knowledge . . . . Only the truth that builds [or commits] is truth for you.[17]

Of course, failing to provide a conclusion and leaving resolution with the reader does not mean that for Kierkegaard there's no better or worse at stake. It just means that Kierkegaard won't hand a decision to us on a platter – which would be to *take* the decision from us.

There are personal risks in making judgments that expose our own commitments (or lack thereof). Objective scholarly pursuits provide cover from such risks, a place where we can enjoy aesthetic indecision. On the other hand, we might resist the aesthetic allure of indecision. Operating from a more engaged stance would flatten the dramatic appeal of an irresolvable either/or. Being existentially oriented would undo the neutrality-tilt in our construals. Our half-knowing, half-willing role in constructing a standoff would be exposed, and an undecided "balance" between "A" and the Judge would begin to look like an irresponsible ruse devised to get us off the moral hook. Once deliberation is approached as if it had existential bearing, it's hard to imagine that reasons *wouldn't* tilt the balance, one way or the other. It's most *unlikely* that we'd arrive at the same answer each time we tested the moral weight of each competing position, and that the answer would be that "A"'s reasons weigh in *exactly* equal to the Judge's. Assuming that reason will provide a tilt would upwardly revise our sense of reason's power and upwardly revise our sense of our own moral efficacy as readers. Because we face a text that reveals our personal position within the oppositions it describes, our reading makes a moral difference. We have a stake in how this crux resolves.

Kierkegaard is unapologetic as he tests the moral standing of his readers. We avow moral interests yet cultivate a pose of aesthetic neutrality, and now this dissemblance gets full exposure. From quite a different angle, we're reminded that despite our taking existential engagement seriously – if we do – nevertheless the moral will can be defeated, stymied. A choice is intractable when my will cannot even begin to

17 *CUP*, p. 252. The bracketed insertions are my own.

achieve what it properly wants to achieve without immediate and devastating loss. In the present case, we might imagine that the will cannot even begin to achieve what it wants. We want the stability and security of the ethical *and* the excitement, novelty, and risk of the aesthetic. From this angle, one or the other must be painfully sacrificed. This outcome, too, would take our would-be omni-competent wills down a notch.

Three Modes of Inquiry

The outcome of a moral dialogue like that displayed in *Either/Or* should be an advance in inquiry that takes us closer to the truth we seek. We've been staying close to the way Kierkegaard (or his pseudonyms) would describe the conflict and its possible resolution, but we could try to locate his interests in moral truth by starting with a more general map of moral inquiry. In fact, MacIntyre provides such a map in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. The rival versions that he explores he calls the Encyclopedic, the Genealogical, and, simply, "Tradition." The Encyclopedic sees moral inquiry as scholarly, dispassionate devotion to the accumulation of timeless objective truths. One assumes a position of detached impartiality above the fray of conflicting cultures, societies, or interest groups. The Genealogical style rejects any presumption to objectivity or detachment and sets to show that moral inquiry and its results are always compromised by struggles for power and advantage. The winners get to call their victory "truth." Inquiry becomes unmasking what passes for "inquiry," "objectivity," "rationality," or "truth," reducing these ideals to rhetorical ploys.

The Thomist, Augustinian, or Aristotelian approach to inquiry MacIntyre calls "Tradition." It sees truth-acquisition as craft-related, as part of an historically embedded practice that includes the initiation of apprentices into the skills, attitudes, and sensitivities that a specific tradition identifies as the excellence of the master of the craft. Here the *telos* of inquiry is not merely to arrive at knowledge but to become an exemplary person of a certain sort, an exemplary inquirer. The Encyclopedist, a child of the Enlightenment, would see failure in moral inquiry as a failure in rationality, a failure to grasp timeless truths, a failure attributed to a defect of method or of protocols of justification. The Traditionalist would locate failure in moral inquiry as a failure to incorporate in one's life-practice the virtues of one's tradition.

The practitioner of Tradition puts virtue at the heart of inquiry and prizes emulation of those who embody it.[18]

Kierkegaard falls outside MacIntyre's three-part division of inquiry. Against the Genealogical style, he holds that there is moral truth to discover. Inquiry is not confined to unmasking *illusions* of moral truth. And against the Encyclopedic version, he does not believe that moral or religious truth has been accumulating in the library of objective knowledge, acquired by impersonal science or scholarship. And Kierkegaard cannot be *simply* a Traditionalist.

Kierkegaard could endorse the moral realism characteristic of Tradition: we confront non-illusory ideals and virtues. He could embrace the inescapability of apprenticeship: moral learning is not primarily abstract rational inquiry. It is more like learning to follow in the footsteps of a St. Francis, a Socrates or Christ. He could endorse the Traditionalist view that reseachers or scholars (and, for the most part, teachers) should be engaged in changing the hearts and lives of students and others who come in contact with their work – a view of moral engagement that does not square happily with the "value-free" assumptions of a modern research university. However, in the long run Kierkegaard's perspective on truth and inquiry cannot be aligned with Inquiry-as-Tradition. First, the sort of virtue a Traditionalist might advance would typically set a goal we can achieve with effort and training. Yet some virtues Kierkegaard will stress *cannot* be achieved with effort or training but only be welcomed as a gift from sources we cannot control. Second, his use of pseudonyms and indirection contravenes the requirements of transparency that are essential to both Geneological and Encyclopedist inquiry, and that are also essential to the master-apprentice relationships of Tradition. There is no ready label for the rogue position that he occupies.

Truth and Inquiry

If we fail to capture moral truth, the fitting follow-up (for Kierkegaard) is neither an embrace of radical choice nor a new campaign to corner truths through impersonal inquiry. For Kierkegaard, the follow-up to such failure is learning to accept pious

18 We might say that, for a Thomist or Aristotelian, the master of a craft has character and stands for the best in a certain way of life. From this angle, virtues of objective theoretical inquiry are not in principle sundered from virtues of moral practice. There is no great chasm between apprenticing oneself to the life of inquiry and apprenticing oneself to the life of moral or religious virtue. The life of science and the moral or religious life share the structure of virtue-pursuit. These two callings, sometimes violently opposed in the Enlightenment tradition, share respect for truth and candor, respect for the community of one's fellow practitioners, respect for relevant traditions and practices, and a commitment to carry them forward in the light of new challenges, acknowledgment of luminous exemplars, and the desire to incorporate and carry on their example. This consensus in aspiration gives reason to hope that the morally valuable and virtuous, in the university or outside it, would not be divorced from the "objective," the scholarly and the scientific. Thus the idea of the philosopher as a moral sage or of the scientist as a moral exemplar would not seem aberrant, confused or incoherent. See my remarks on intimacy and love of one's objective pursuits, p. 83, above. This too is inculucated in an apprentice-master relationship.

will, relinquishing assertive freedom, renouncing the claims of an imperial, endlessly colonizing self. Yet a humbled will cannot be one that's flattened or destroyed. Receptive willingness remains, and on Kierkegaard's account, willingness is a state sufficiently energized to support "an infinite interest" (no less!) in ethico-religious truths – truths grasped in "infinite passion" – or that grasp *us* infinitely. Such interest or passion is essential to a fully human self. A drive toward self-sufficiency can be dropped without diminishing necessary passion or producing a flat or supine self.[19] Epistemic failure typically incites a renewed pursuit of truth, but it might instead lead to a reconsideration of the place of inquiry within the wider interests of virtue. The obstacle of epistemic failure might call for acceptance of Socratic ignorance. Such acceptance might blend toward a Christian patience or humility, but that's at best a marginal possibility on the present cultural horizon.

Cutting back on an all-consuming pursuit of truth is not to forswear a passionate regard for truth. Such regard keeps conflict between moral positions within the domain of discussion and inquiry and not just part of post-modern culture wars. The conflict-riven history of social thought, moral traditions, or science suggests that a passionate regard for truth, on its own, will not guarantee smooth sailing in human affairs. Nevertheless, regard for truth lets us judge Darwin to be an advance on his predecessors, and abolitionist arguments to be an advance on arguments for slavery, and free speech to be an advance on rampant censorship. Moral and scientific advance alike presuppose something like an efficacious Kantian regulative ideal of truth, and Kierkegaard would not deny this. He has no bone to pick with objective truths delivered by inquiry, or to truths that discriminate ways of moral-spiritual advance, so long as the pursuit of "subjectivity" – the task of answering moral and religious and aesthetic demands upon us – is not obstructed or denied. Worthy *inquiry* about a worthy life shouldn't obscure the need to *live* worthily – and should ideally *culminate* in living worthily.[20]

In the long run, Kierkegaard's goal is Socratic. He aims to bring us to our better selves. That goal is clearly quite distinct from seeking truths of inquiry – the results of a university research agenda, for instance. As we've seen, from the start he's sought a truth for which he could live and die – one that would make *him* alive as the person he might be. And, in his writing, he seeks to set his readers in a position where they might become alive to the person *they* might become or be.[21]

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19 I develop the contrast between willing receptivity and assertive–selective will in Chapter Two of *Selves in Discord and Resolve*. Also, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 1999. I thank John Davenport for reminding me that "the humbled will" must be imbued with "infinite passion," and for many other helpful comments.

20 See Robert C. Roberts, "The Philosopher as Sage" *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 22, Fall 1994. On Kierkegaard's views on subjectivity, inwardness, and passion as continuous with the classical view of character, see Roberts's ground-breaking article "Classical Themes in the *Postscript*," in Gordon Marino and Alastair Hannay, eds, *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

21 In the Gilleje testament, as we've seen, Kierkegaard avows his need not of more and more scholarly knowledge but of a truth on which he can stake his life, a truth to unify and give coherence to his life. This would be a truth for (and of) subjectivity, meaningful

A life exemplifying a truth for which a subject stakes a life requires commitment to virtues or ways of being. It means seeking virtue and also heeding the limits of impersonal knowledge-seeking. Socratic ignorance marks a point where knowledge-seeking gives way, perhaps to poetry, perhaps to love, perhaps to letting things be as the gods would have them. There is moral truth to access about ways of life or virtues – the way they are, the way they seem, spread out before us. And there's a moral truth *about* such truth, namely that some number of such truths are to be *incorporated* within an agent's life. To seek truth, on this view, is to seek the contours of a virtue or way of being. This can look like embarking on a path of inquiry. But to seek the contours of a virtue is not, for Kierkegaard, just a way to satisfy a merely intellectual curiosity about a virtue. To seek the contours of a virtue is to seek what it would be to be *answerable* to its truth, and to place one's self to receive or live within that truth. The outcome would be to take that virtue to heart, letting it become incorporated in one's life. And somewhat paradoxically, the moral truths we thereby gain will depend, at least partially, on our capacity and willingness to live the very truths we seek, as if we already had a glimmer (at least) of them. Someone utterly unacquainted with the living of a love, or unwilling to live a love, will be severely handicapped (to say the least) in seeking out its contours.[22] In order to fully find it, one must have it partially in hand.

We learn living of a truth or virtue from exemplars who tell us *about* a virtue but also who bolster confidence in our ability to move *toward* a virtue and be moved by it. A moral exemplar – Socrates, or Christ, for example – has a dual part to play, showing the way and pulling one towards it. Exemplars provide occasion for a moral truth to "rub off" on us, for us to be infused, inspired, instructed by their exemplifications. Getting moral truth to lodge in life requires a capacity to grasp or be grasped by a virtue and what it demands, requires a capacity personally to *answer* its demands in the concrete situations in which we find ourselves, and, finally, requires the actual *action* that answers the demand. A virtue lodged in a life is a *history of realizing that capacity*, making the virtue an actual disposition of character. We must know how to mobilize our will in modes of receptivity, incorporating, and answering – and then actually have acted from such will.

One way to mobilize and realize our will is to *get* something to happen: we *work* to be virtuous, and get virtue from effort. But, in some cases, the capacity to incorporate a virtue may require that we let some aspect of the will become slack or incapacitated. To be taught music, or to become more acute in our hearing and listening, is partly *working* to learn or to hear. But it's not *only* that. To learn or to hear is partly letting oneself *be* taught, *be* swept up by notes. This means letting go of an achievement-oriented will, thus making space for a willingness to welcome a teacher, an aria, a melody in their capacity to *work on us* – to teach and transport,

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moral agency. Both MacIntyre and Kierkegaard, although committed to the importance of "subjectivity" in *this* sense, stand opposed to the non-sequitur that since subjects must endorse the truth that will matter to them, therefore truth for an individual is nothing but what he or she may be committed to. I discuss this interplay between subjective and objective aspects of Kierkegaardian truth in Chapter Ten.

22 John Davenport put it thus in conversation.

for instance. The soul can be worthily infused in such moments, moments that presuppose cessation of active will. Subjects must at times be receptive patients.

Kierkegaard has a place for both ways in which the will can be formed – by making and achieving but also by infusion and inspiration. An outcome of this conclusion is that he will be disqualified from membership in any version of virtue ethics that puts exclusive stress on the *pursuit* of virtue, on valorizing endless striving.[23] He values *release* from striving. This release can be the condition of letting an alternative passion *take hold*. I can't *force* the metaphor I need into the line of poetry that lies incomplete before me; my passions are stymied. I cease striving. *Voila!* Or again, I can't *force* the loving connection I seek with this child. I cease striving. By luck or grace, a gentle smile appears. The welcome passion of tender contact supervenes.

Imagine that one is asked by Socrates (or Kierkegaard) to let the virtue of striving for knowledge subside, be rebuffed. This can be a virtue, as in the case of valuing an anti-Faustian Socratic ignorance. We don't *pursue* ignorance, though we might abide and welcome it, say as we stand in awe of starry heavens. Listening, as a phase of learning, likewise requires a kind of receptivity, letting ourselves be patients, being open to another, as another takes on the role of agency. (I return to listening at the end of Chapter Nine.) In these instances we seem to answer a demand of virtue not by doing or striving to achieve, but by *letting something happen*.[24]

To seek essential, saving truth is to *welcome* rather than to strive. That takes us to a site where truth is realized as it overtakes us, undoes our seeking, infuses itself in the fabric of a life receptive to it. *Postscript*'s Climacus embraces "living in the truth," allowing truth to live in one's inhabitation of it. He can advance inquiry through persuading us (for example) that a Socratic life is better than the Judge's conventionality – because it's truer to the exigencies of a life and truer to all a person can be in passion, responsibility, and intellect. But to become responsive to that Socratic truth, living in unknowing, as it were, means that we've *allowed* that truth to overtake our will, allowed it to be incorporated as willingness. As Hamlet has it, the willingness, "the readiness, is all" – "*Let it be!*"[25]

Kierkegaard's aims outstrip the aims of solely *academic* philosophical work. He assumes readers to be receptive to queries or warnings about the moral quality of their lives and receptive to *intervention in* their lives. Academic work can ask readers to *see* the truth, but it falls short of asking anyone to *live* in that truth. Yet the desire to have moral insight fulfill itself in moral character is strong. We hope, in fact, that a philosopher who can delineate the contours of the virtues and the good life will also

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23 I thank Marcia Robinson for reminding me of the considerations that place Kierkegaard outside some versions of "virtue ethics," and for many other helpful comments. See the important discussions of these issues in Roberts, note 20, above.

24 "Letting something happen" in answer to a demand is related to what Kierkegaard calls "repetition." See Chapter Nine. A willingness to "let something happen" also figures as a prescription for the cure of sin or defiance; a refusal of the will to accept the good it confronts is discussed in *Sickness Unto Death*.

25 *Hamlet*, V, ii, 220, 343.

be a *person who lives answerable* to such insight, and whose person passes on such a demand to others. We hope, as Robert C. Roberts puts it, that

> . . . a philosopher can be a person with especially deep moral understanding and insight and with unusual powers of imaginative expression . . . . [We hope that] the philosopher may be a moral sage.[26]

With Socrates, Kierkegaard embraces the aims of midwifery, of ministering birth or change – an aim we might with trepidation yet embrace, but that inquiry alone cannot deliver.[27]

Beyond Inquiry: Masking Truth

Needing truth, we seek it, or ready ourselves for its advent. We might seek to live in love or wonder or hope or trust, but to seek to capture these through inquiry positions a seeker's will against the possibility of being captured *by* wonder or love, hope, or trust. To actually live in hope, or love, or wonder can't be the result of maneuvering love or hope to have it live in us any more than we can maneuver God to have God live in us or maneuver trust to have it live in us. The truths we live in overtake us and are not the product of a discipline meant to master them. Divested of the conceit that we already possess the truth, or that we already hold it in the right way, or that we have the means to capture it, we would be available or ready for the advent of a truth known in the living of it. Indirection and disguise are tactics pertinent to this contrast between truth we grasp directly and truth that grasps us, disarming our will.

The Judge or "A" or Socrates may hold any number of true beliefs that will be idle existentially if they reside in a will that's misaligned or "enabled" too assertively. Kierkegaard's recurrent ironic skepticism about a particular belief or stance is compatible with his holding that the very same belief or stance is a truth worth living. His irony can target the manner of our holding a truth – say, thoughtlessly, or with inappropriately humbled mind and will. He attends the features of our grip, the manner, the *how*, of our gripping – not only to *what* is gripped. Announcing *knowingly* that Socratic ignorance is a virtue (*gripping* this truth in a certain tone) is to live in untruth even though it's true that Socratic ignorance is a virtue.

Kierkegaard holds that truth is subjectivity, that God speaks to persons one by one and not in crowds, that hubristic will is damning. Nevertheless, he has good reason to avoid unequivocally *announcing* these truths – that is, delivering them directly, or without disguise. And he has good reason for a stance of irony, or even

26 Roberts, "The Philosopher as Sage", p. 430.

27 The deliverances of repetition, or, in theological terms, of grace, lie outside the purview of inquiry. Put in secular terms, for moral insight to lodge as part of personal advance, we may need, among other things, a supportive community and not-too-oppressive political surroundings, parents who have given good enough love, friends, mentors, and any number of other "aids." Inquiry alone cannot line up these factors (over which we may have little or no control) in the service of moral growth. See Chapter Nine. In Chapter Four, I describe the modern university's detachment from, and disavowal of, the teaching of character, passion, and self-knowledge.

of disavowal.[28] For the sake of his *own* moral health, Kierkegaard must avoid the overbearing pride of assuming that his salvation is *secure* by virtue of his holding such potentially redeeming truths. He cannot come to conceive these truths as fully within the mastering powers of his will to keep them well-caged and tame, no doubt serving as objects of his self-satisfied regard. For the sake of his *readers*' moral health, he must avoid having the will of his audience distorted by his presence. This means that we not believe something because he believed in it, or because he said it was true; that we not repeat what he says by rote; and that we not "run with the truth" fanatically or dogmatically, or with self-satisfied assurance. To discover the truth that matters cannot be simply to discover what matters to Kierkegaard. He breaks the crutch and pride of a reader's claim to have at last unraveled Kierkegaard's meaning, and thus to have acquired a redeeming truth.

There are two tasks, then, that Kierkegaard must balance artfully. He must downsize the pretensions of a boundlessly assertive will. He can do this by knocking down the crutch and pride of a reader's exaggerated claim to know. But equally, and simultaneously, he must protect and encourage a reader's "infinite passion" for the truth. He must ensure that a humbled will is still a *person*'s will – not something anonymous, drained of vital personality, and so made listless and hence vulnerable to exploitation by individuals or institutions out to mold or master others. But how can pretension be drained while preserving passion?

For Kierkegaard, an "infinite passion" for ethical-religious truth is at the root of vital personality. This passion is our deepest value to protect. Hocking calls this passion the "personal center of caring, the heart," and identifies that passion with the soul, that which values value.[29] But passion is surely not the *planned pursuit* of virtue. Passions, after all, overtake us; we undergo them, and go with them.[30] An on-stage actor can be skilled at summoning a passion, but in her off-stage life (or his), a summoned passion will be suspect. Our "infinite passion" for truth includes deep and passionate gratitude for truths already bestowed; it includes infinite, passionate respect for, and devotion to, the overarching sources of truth-bestowal; and it includes a vital, heart-felt sense of the need for a moral-spiritual identity answered and sustained by a world, a creation, replete with such bestowals.

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28 See Chapter Twelve. Pursuing the task of humbling our minds and wills might mark humility on his part – Kierkegaard does not presume to give us a final truth, only to prepare us for it. Then again, he presumes our wills or minds need humbling. For an argument that irony permeates even Kierkegaard's signed, "veronymous" works, see Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997. Thus the preface to an early discourse reads: "This little book . . . wishes to be only what it is, a superfluity, and desires only to remain in hiding." Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 5. It's not only pseudonyms that realize that a religious author must remain ironically "hidden" – in the interest of indirect communication.

29 W.E. Hocking, unpublished Gifford Lectures, 1941.

30 I give an overview of the stances philosophers have taken toward the passions in "Becoming What We Pray: Passion's Gentler Resolutions," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, Chapter 3.

Humbling residual Promethean aspirations does not deplete but opens us to such an "infinite passion" for saving truth. It gives us soul. Kierkegaardian passion can fully animate a humbled will, and *only* such a humbled will can be the site and sponsor of this necessary passion.

Now, how does this throw light on indirection and disguise? Well, Kierkegaard cannot directly deliver guidelines for the capture of the truth that he anticipates will rescue him; nor can he directly transmit (after the fact) a saving encounter or truth that might have rescued him. Say the saving truth for him is the truth that his will be humbled. Access to this truth excludes him from assertively *proclaiming* it. One cannot assertively impress on others that one's will is less assertive – without denying the point in the making of it. Paradoxically, however, if he has a wish to engage with his listeners on these matters, there are communicative strategies available. What can't be announced assertively can be presented tentatively under the guise of a pseudonym. What can't be a capturable truth can be alluded to, and then disavowed – enacting in the light and shadow of its delivery-and-revocation its very elusiveness to capture. If Kierkegaard learns that truth lies in a humbled will, he can convey that thought obliquely, as we'll see in Chapter Twelve, by disowning his creations, by not exercising a possessiveness toward them, and by not basking in their beauty, wisdom, or truth before the adoring eyes of others.

In summary, then, deploying communicative strategies that keep truth partially hidden is an appropriate, even necessary response in light of Kierkegaard's desire to be true to his faith and calling. He must, in all humility and passion, honor the truths he's received by not pretending to a security he can't possess, by not shouting foolishly from rooftops. He must convey an affect other than self-importance. Second, with regard to his audience, indirection and concealment are rooted in his desire to defeat a puzzle-solving, merely aesthetic "interested" stance in pursuit of packaged truth. Third, he sees the need to prevent his persuasive artistry from flooding his reader's will, thus drowning individuality, and making moot the necessity for a reader to exercise her *own* passionate "infinitely interested" will – however humbled it may be. And, fourth, Kierkegaard wants to disclaim ecclesiastical or special moral-religious authority for his views. He disarms the potential of his writing to deceive in these respects by pleading a kind of ironic Socratic ignorance and by taking his own name from the pseudonymous works. He thus honors the truth he's received and accordingly preserves for his reader a sanctuary for self-fashioning and reception before an absolutely Other.

A Final Thought

There's a nearly irresistible impulse to seek out from among the multiple deliverance's of his texts, pseudonymous or signed, what precisely Kierkegaard *himself* might hold, in his midnight hour, in the privacy of his chamber, in all candor. But yielding to this impulse, devoting hours of detective work to the task, is ultimately bound to

fail and remain a project misconceived. It's what Kierkegaard would call a humorous endeavor.[31] This is partly because he himself may be unsure what he "in truth" holds – holds with properly humbled will and mind. It's also a humorous endeavor because in signing on, we thereby fall for the temptation to take his writing solely as a puzzle to be solved, and we thereby miss two crucial points of his writing – namely, that we should avoid an aesthetic problem-solving approach to saving truths, and that we should avoid making his "private belief" relevant to our lives merely because it's *his*. So it's *not* as if a sifting process occurs in which Kierkegaard gradually lets more and more of the truth out of the bag. The decisive event is not a sifting out of propositional truths but a reduction of will and increase in passion – prompted by Kierkegaard's progressively sophisticated deployment of positions and counter-positions, with humor and irony throughout.

This sifting from within the authorship for a collage revealing his settled views is, from Kierkegaard's predominantly *existential* position, largely idle work. It allows charming explorations to overtake the urgencies of incorporation, commitment, and engaged response – the *living out* of whatever truths might be at issue. Yet this sifting for his settled views may have an *indirect* role to play. Perhaps it can only dawn on us that sifting is idle existentially after we have begun to sift, or have sifted fruitlessly, for some painful time. More specifically, perhaps we can only absorb the humbling impact of Kierkegaard's repeated refusals to provide a special packaged truth after we have engaged for some painful time in our familiar pursuit of (appropriately disguised) specially packaged truth. He knows his audience.

31 See "Climacus among the philosophers," in Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2003, Chapter 1.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Fear and Trembling: Spectacular Diversions[1]

One tries to imprison life in a book,
like a songbird in a cage,
but it's no good.
– Franz Kafka

Veils of Irony

Kafka says that all books worth reading should "bite and sting . . . and strike us like a blow on the skull."[2] *Fear and Trembling* seems to promise this. But with second thoughts, it has an unnervingly light-hearted, teasing tone, at odds with the seriousness of the subject. Its author seems to be of two minds about fear and trembling.

It will help to distinguish the moral-religious anxiety that Paul refers to as "working out our salvation in fear and trembling"[3] from its shallow counterfeit, the fascination we have with ghost stories, horror films, bogey men, and Janus-faced clowns. Johannes Climacus in *Postscript* takes the book, outwardly, to be a "blow on the head" or, as he puts it, a "shriek" of horror – while inwardly, it concerns an "abyss" one might endure silently.[4] Is the outward shriek a religious expression, or a diversion? If faith is marked by inwardness, perhaps we should not trust anything

1 My remarks on the spectacular are inspired by George Pattison's *"Poor Paris!": Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Kierkegaard Studies: Monograph Series 2, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999. Linking Tivoli and the spectacular to *Fear and Trembling* is entirely my own invention.

2 From a letter from Kafka to Oskar Pollak, 1904, quoted in Roberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 93. (For the epigraph, see Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, 2nd edn, trans. Goronwy Rees, New York: New Directions, 1971.) Manguel also notes, with regard to Kafka (who, of course, was greatly influenced by Kierkegaard), ". . . there is no last page to *The Castle* because K., the hero, must never reach it, so that the reader can continue into the multilayered text forever" (p. 92). He places Kafka in a tradition that holds that " . . . the text must continually tempt the reader with a revelation" (p. 91). I argue that *Fear and Trembling* constantly tempts the reader with a religious revelation, and never delivers. The Kafka epigraph appears in Manguel, p. 91. See also Hermann Schmid, "Kafka tanzt nicht," in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser and Jon Stewart, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook, 2001*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001, pp. 268-94.

3 Philippians 2:12

4 *CUP*, p. 262.

presented to elicit a shriek of horror. Perhaps we should be *suspicious* of our immediate response to an Abraham, knife raised.

The matter is whether, or at what level, to trust the response of horror. Johannes de silentio seems to evoke this response in his many retellings of the Genesis story, but in fact the matter is left strangely ambiguous. I'll aim to resolve this ambiguity by arguing that the frightening Abraham portraits in fact *divert* us from religious fear and trembling, and have little to do with moral or religious horror.

Quite apart from whether the "terror" of these Abraham portraits is meant straightforwardly, it's striking that much of *Fear and Trembling* unfolds in a landscape far removed from "shrieks of horror." The second half operates some distance from either the glories or frights of faith. The exercise of untying philosophical knots, *problema*, diverts us from the immediate *angst* of spiritual crisis. The first half of *Fear and Trembling* fares somewhat better in this regard; it delivers the celebrated sketches of Abraham raising his knife. However, even in these early sections, horror is often forgotten. It is missing entirely in the preface, and later sections are full of lyric, satire, and light comedy. Furthermore, even the scenes focused on Abraham, Isaac, and Moriah evade the specific fear and trembling of faith. Each portrait of Abraham is a portrait of someone who *fails* God's test, is an *unfaithful* Abraham. So any pathos or *angst* we may experience must fall short of the pathos of faith. If not the pathos of faith, then, what *is* the mood these portraits exemplify?

Johannes de silentio's portraits appeal to our endless (and suspect) gothic fascination with violence, blood, and the grotesque. But Johannes' commentaries also appeal to healthy interests, to our interests in things innocent and delightful, sad or funny: a young man falls in love with a princess, a quixotic knight practices dance leaps, a shopkeeper looks down on the square beneath him, noting a rat scampering under a board, an old man remembers a beautiful story he was told as a child, the good citizens of Copenhagen celebrate the opening of a new bus system. The tone or mood of Johannes' telling is often close to Cervantes in his comic tale of a knight and friend moving in and out of fantastic adventures, never quite sure they know who they are, whether they're in a novel or out of it.

In a somewhat grandiose aside, Kierkegaard claims that his name will become immortal through the "terrible pathos" that *Fear and Trembling* contains.[5] This "pathos," however, lies in its "abyss of inwardness," a dizzying abyss we experience in reading. How does Kierkegaard (or Johannes de silentio) establish this "pathos of inwardness"? I'll argue that it rests in a subtle and sustained "two-mindedness" suffered by its author about what his tasks are, and hence a disturbing "two-mindedness" about who he is. Both readers and author suffer the "terrible pathos" of being drawn into an abyss that repeatedly undercuts the consolation and security of singleness of vision and singleness of self.

The "terrible pathos" at issue is a frightening anxiety about what should be in focus, how it should be focused, and who the author is. Somewhat abstractly, we could call

5 "Once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough to immortalize my name. It will be read and translated into foreign languages. People will shudder at the terrible pathos which the book contains." *FT*, p. 257.

this "the infinite pathos of irony." Irony, on this view, is the capacity to "step back" and call into question any gestures toward conviction that might secure a single point of view or identity. The "stepping back" removes us toward "the eternal." Johannes Climacus calls such irony "the retirement of the temporal into the eternal."[6] More pointedly, it raises the question: "Beneath the irony, what is it that I really believe? What is it that she (or he) really believes?"

An infinite gap can split the writer's life from her poem or her job, a thinker from his existence, even as each acknowledges a gap-defying connectedness that resists direct expression. On this view, Sartre's view of human consciousness is that consciousness is *essentially* ironic: "I am what I am not, and am not what I am."[7] The legacy of this romantic theme is apparent in modern (and postmodern) depictions of the loss of a coherent narrative of the self, or of a center to a text. "Two-mindedness" is caught in Johannes Climacus' claim that "the subjective thinker is not a poet even if he is also a poet, not an ethicist even if he is also an ethicist, [is not a dialectician] but is also a dialectician."[8]

Failure to find a belief that is resistant to the corrosives of ironic reflection strips us of confidence, self-trust, or certitude. This irony is "infinite" because it is iterative: just when we think we have cornered Johannes' intentions, (or he thinks he has cornered his) he switches fields, reverses directions. As enthralled readers, we suffer the unsettling disorientations Johannes himself plays out. We are disorientated, spiritually, because we are unsure of the place we occupy. As Climacus puts it in *Postscript*, "in the world of spirit, a change of place is a change in oneself."[9] This infinite irony is a matter of "pathos" because finding myself at risk is not just an intellectual discovery, but a deep-felt anxiety that can verge on despair.

On the matter of what should be in focus, Johannes vacillates between producing theatrics posing as faith, and, alternatively, searching for the "infinitely different" passions of authentic Christian faith.[10] On the matter of how it should be focused, he vacillates between a mock-declarative style and an unmistakably comic or satirical style. And to tell the truth, Johannes is unsure, or misleads himself, about what he's doing and how he's doing it.

For example, the opening of "Attunement," or "Mood" ("Exordium," for the Hongs) has the appearance of preparing us to consider the pathos of faith. But instead it pursues the folly of hero worship. Similarly, when we encounter the shopkeeping knight of faith, we'd expect a somber "tone" or "mood." Instead we get light-hearted humor and sometimes outright farce. For example, Abraham on Moriah couldn't

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6 *CUP*, p. 272; Johannes de silentio (or Kierkegaard) identifies himself in *Fear and Trembling* as assuming an "ironic incognito," *FT*, p. 252. Elsewhere, Climacus calls himself a humorist. For a discussion of irony as "being of two minds about something," see Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 79.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 617. Cf. Iago, "I am not what I am!," *Othello*, I, i.

8 *CUP*, p. 351.

9 *CUP*, p. 281.

10 Marcia Robinson reminds me of Kierkegaard's critique of Bishop Mynster, who from the splendor of his pulpit asks his parishioners to consider what it might mean for them to be a martyr.

count on God providing a lamb; but when it appeared, he accepted it, and took his knife to it. The shopkeeper knight of faith eagerly anticipates lamb for dinner; but if there is none there, he'll accept that, and take his knife to whatever is offered.[11]

So the sustained pathos of the book is related to the shifts and reversals of subject-matter and tone. This flux of standpoints seems never to let up. It persistently unsettles our expectations, and keeps us fascinated. But often we are unsure exactly what we are to make of it all, or of the enigmatic author in charge. Our fascination is like our fascination with reversible figures that keep changing aspect against our will, putting us in a spin. It's hard to shake off.

There is a remarkable undertow of uncertainty in content and style.[12] This makes it dangerous to assume that we're tracking the passion of faith. Either faith is caught up in more uncertainty and "doubleness" than we might have believed, or else the uncertainty and doubleness are signs that we're tracking something other than religious faith. And that may be exactly the serious point of the book: the difficulty of distinguishing faith from its simulacra. Tracking Abraham, at least in the manner Johannes de silentio tracks him, may be tracking a counterfeit of faith, and in a manner that is radically unfaithful.

Fear and Trembling is concerned with irreligious depictions of Abraham, and with depictions of others in irreligious pursuits. The "terrible pathos" of the book is not the pathos of faith but the pathos created when we sense, with appropriate trepidation and irritation, that this book purporting to be about faith is really making fun, at our expense, of a confusion between faith, on the one hand, and, on the other, the theatrics of spectacle and hero worship – and yet we cannot be entirely sure that this is the case because Johannes may not be sure about it, and he can turn his irony on himself as well as on us, endlessly.

I develop these points in three stages. I look first at a paradigmatic instance of an "amusement" posing as faith; this takes us to Tivoli. Then I look at some length at the actual words Johannes uses in setting up his quartet of Abraham portraits. And, last, I look for some important constructive themes that survive the failed attempt to discover a religious fear and trembling in *Fear and Trembling.*

Amusements, Diversions, and "Spiritual Shows"

Let me begin to make my case. I'll focus on a theatrical spectacle underway in Copenhagen as Kierkegaard was writing his dialectic lyric. George Pattison reminds us, in his monograph, *"Poor Paris!"*, that Tivoli opened with great fanfare in 1843,

11 *FTP*, p. 69; *FT*, p. 39.

12 In a note, Kierkegaard identifies the pathos of *Fear and Trembling* as rooted in the tension between Johannes de silentio's light-heartedness, on the one hand, and the suffering that Kierkegaard himself was undergoing at the time of writing. Why didn't Kierkegaard "come clean" about the pathos – either the pathos of Abraham's knife, or the pathos of writing light-heartedly in the midst of crisis? "For the author to appear earnest would have diminished the horror." It is better to "go about in the incognito of an idler." *FT*, p. 257. This relates to Larmore's idea that irony begins in two-mindedness. Pathos can be increased by distancing oneself from it.

the same year that *Fear and Trembling* was published.[13] It was conceived as a world-class attraction, and was several years in the making. As it turned out, Tivoli was an immediate success, drawing spectators from all over Europe. Kierkegaard could not have missed the debates that surrounded its construction. In the foreground was the question whether this "spectacular monstrosity" would corrupt the city in virtue of its purely aesthetic, pleasure-vending purposes. Whatever the considerable financial advantage in attracting tourists, the moral critics were vocal. Their critique was essentially Kierkegaardian (though they obviously couldn't put it that way).

First, the park levels distinctions between social classes (everybody would rub elbows with everybody). Second, it distracts the public from serious political matters (which was an advantage in the eyes of the King). Third, it relieves the public from any serious moral-religious concerns (which both alarms and fascinates Kierkegaard). Innocent amusement is a thin veil disguising tainted interests and desires.[14] A comparison with the aesthetic attractions and ethical dangers of Las Vegas is not out of place. There we find the ultimate aesthetic city-theme-park: glittering buildings replicate Paris, New York, and Egyptian Pyramids; lush and exotic floor shows and musical entertainment abound; unabashed appeals to a variety of material and sensual desires crush in on one another in a festive, melancholy, and threateningly spectacular mix.[15]

Tivoli also managed to exemplify a fourth element of Kierkegaard's critique of the age. It explicitly leveled the distinction between the religious and the aesthetic, for the park included, among other attractions, a wax-figure exhibit featuring scenes from the life of Christ.[16] The figures had movable heads and limbs. I imagine crowds of vacationers turning from the rides and Chinese malls for the spectacle of a wax simulacra of the Son of Man gesturing like an awkward doll. Were appropriate excerpts from the Gospel intoned from behind a dark curtain – with great feeling?

A title from Kierkegaard's *Writing Sampler* from roughly this period shows his grasp of the comic possibilities that this side-show presented. It reads: "Some Sketches for the Spiritual Peep Show for Use on Sundays by the Faithful."[17] Earlier, in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard characterized Xenophon as staging Socrates in

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13 See Pattison, *"Poor Paris!"*, Chapter 2.

14 Kierkegaard mentions not Tivoli, but the Deer Park, as a sign that Copenhagen is becoming "the pleasure capitol of Europe," with free entertainments, theater, and prostitutes. Pattison, *"Poor Paris!"*, p. 101. But surely the two market similar dangers.

15 A contemporary critic lampooned the amusement-sector of the Deer Park by mentioning the mad mix of "tents and booths, carousels, menageries, wheels of fortune and panoramas, wax figures and waffle sellers, marionette theaters, fire eaters, shrieking, shouting, noise, miracles, spectacles." Pattison, *"Poor Paris!"*, p. 99.

16 Ibid., p. 23. See also Pattison's discussion of the Deer Park, pp. 98-104

17 Ibid., p. 45. See Kierkegaard, *Prefaces*/*Writing Sampler*, trans. Todd W. Nichol, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, KW, IX, p. 140. The date given is 1844-45, which would be after *Fear and Trembling* appeared. But the idea of a peep show might well have *preceded* Kierkegaard's jotting down the particular title, "Some Sketches for the Spiritual Peep Show." In fact, he had imagined a "spiritual peep show" as early as *The Concept of Irony* (see note 18 below).

a peep show (or puppet box).[18] And Kierkegaard proposes "cutting out the story [of Abraham] in paper silhouettes" – the sort of figures one might insert in a miniature, hand-held "peep show."[19] In June 1842, the Theatre Royal put on a sketch called *The Peep Show* that featured everything from windmills to cabbages to the Battle of Copenhagen.[20]

As you have guessed, I'm proposing that *Fear and Trembling*, especially the fantastic Attunement sketches of Abraham, can be read as elaborating the premise of "a spiritual peep show for the people." And I'm also proposing that at some level of his expansive, inventive, and theater-loving consciousness (and however dimly), Kierkegaard could see *Fear and Trembling* as a literary "world-class" extravaganza parallel to the extravaganza that was Tivoli. Of course, I don't need to take the extreme and implausible position that Kierkegaard could not have written *Fear and Trembling* without the model of Tivoli. My more restricted suggestion is that Tivoli was something Kierkegaard could not have missed, and that it is nearly impossible that its potential for satirical treatment would be lost on him. Furthermore, a link between Tivoli and *Fear and Trembling* makes extremely good interpretative sense: as we will see, it gives us a handle on several otherwise puzzling features of the text.

Let's test the idea. Kierkegaard could display a variety of attractions, including a three-round dialectical juggling match (corresponding to the three *problema* of the text). The centerpiece could be a frightening but irresistible "peep" at four replications of Abraham in motion, raising his knife (corresponding to the four scenes in the early Attunement or *Stemning* section of the text). As I imagine it, Johannes de silentio is cast in a number of roles, their pure proliferation corresponding to the uncertainty about who he is, and what he's doing.

As a carnival pitch man, Johannes calls the strolling throngs away from the merry-go-round and other miscellaneous diversions to his particular freak show – theatrics posing as faith, a peek at Abraham in four thrilling sets.[21] He is the witty, talkative master of ceremonies. He stages extravagant dialectical excursions. He tells fascinating stories of knights of faith and resignation. He gives cameo appearances to a number of stage personalities, among them Richard III, Agamemnon, and Faust. He invents memorable figures like the shopkeeping (or tax collecting) knight of faith, and the sorrowful young man who has lost his princess. Johannes speaks revealingly of our strange wish to see carnival spectacles: "garish birds, freak fish, and grotesque

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18 *The Concept of Irony, With Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 27.

19 *FT*, p. 270.

20 Kierkegaard responds to Henrik Hertz's 1842 amusement *The Peep Show* as follows: ". . . a 'public' is something that everybody, even a drunken sailor with a peep show, can acquire." Pattison, *"Poor Paris!"*, pp. 44 and 101.

21 A contemporary Heiberg's vaudeville featured a would-be impresario (actually, a perpetual student) who promises a side-show encounter with a frightening beast that turns out to be nothing but a fly. See Pattison, *"Poor Paris!"*, p. 100. Similarly, as I'll argue, Johannes entices his crowd to view "the spectacular Abraham," on the assumption, one might suppose, that there was a religious experience waiting within his tent. Instead of faith, or the religious, however, the crowds get to see a beast – or a disappointing fly – or nothing at all.

breeds of the human."[22] He could play up this strange wish to encounter the bizarre and frightening by taking on the role of a carnival barker who lures the crowd to his exhibition tent, then quickly runs backstage to direct the show.

It's worth remembering that Johannes de silentio is himself uncertain about how to characterize his role. He doesn't mention the carnival possibilities. But he is nevertheless quite undecided. He says he is not a philosopher (in the Preface), yet he writes dialectics. He says he is not a poet,[23] yet he writes lyric. He characterizes himself at one point as taking on the garb of a "tragic hero"[24] and, at another, as being a "knight of resignation." At yet another point, he styles himself a "town crier" who will sing Abraham's praises door to door.[25] In the Preface, he identifies himself as a "freelancer" – that is, attached to no particular institutional role or office, but a writer more or less "out of full time work" (a "supplemental clerk," as the Hongs have it).[26] This leaves him free to write and observe "on his own," as he wishes, responsible to no one.

The epigraph may provide another role for Johannes. Here, Kierkegaard refers to Tarquin the Proud, who, by decapitating a row of garden poppies before the eyes of a messenger, sends a secret message to his son. Perhaps Johannes is an unwitting messenger carrying dangerous news. In an epigraph rejected at the last minute, Johannes de silentio names himself "a poet who lives only among poets."[27] That is, he is someone who has no stable, worldly role to identify with. Poets need heroes to give them a stable center. At the start of "Speech in Praise of Abraham" we're told that God's answer to nihilism is his creation of the hero who acts, and the poet who sings his praises.[28] They are reciprocally dependent for their identities. Being "only among poets," without a hero to praise, Johannes slips into a shadowy insubstantial netherland. He has no ground or direction.

This profusion of contrasting roles for Johannes – poet among poets, tragic hero, freelancer, dialectician, and so forth – creates a disordered space that invites further elaboration. Why stop at the directly mentioned parade of possibilities? In this spirit, and with an abundance of indirect textual support, I have suggested casting Johannes de silentio as a part-time carnival barker. This role can complement his other roles, say as poet, or, as in the second half of *Fear and Trembling*, as a part-time dialectician.

One advantage to casting Johannes as a carnival pitch man is that it makes sense of his repeated claim not to understand Abraham. Calling out to the milling crowd to see "The Frighteningly Incomprehensible," to see what certainly defies all understanding, will turn their heads just as quickly as promises of "grotesque breeds of the human." In fact, the spectacularly grotesque is precisely what "defies all understanding." Furthermore, placing Moriah in Tivoli throws light on the puzzle

22 *FTP*, p. 67f. ; *FT*, p. 38.
23 *FTP*, p. 42; *FT*, p. 7.
24 *FTP*, p. 64; *FT*, p. 34.
25 *FTP*, p. 49; *FT*, p. 15.
26 *FTP*, p. 43; *FT*, p. 7.
27 *FT*, p. 243.
28 *FTP*, p. 49; *FT*, p. 15.

Kierkegaard creates in having a writer "reduced to silence" who nevertheless will write what Climacus calls a "shriek."

The puzzle might be solved if the "shriek" comes from viewers (or readers) who suddenly come upon the Abraham installations – unprepared, as it were. Another attractive option is this: as a Tivoli carnival barker, Johannes will both "cry out," even shriek, the frights he promises, and yet be quite silent about the true state of affairs within – namely, that it might not meet expectations, religious or otherwise. And he can simultaneously be the messenger from Tarquin's garden, someone who is in the deepest way ignorant of the import of his cries.

The epigraph featuring the messenger from Tarquin the Proud will remind the astute reader of the ruler who decapitated a row of poppies with a swipe of his sword. This constitutes an unspoken message from a powerful father to an obedient son that it is time for the son to dispatch leaders of his adopted town. But the stress of the epigraph is not on the horror of the instructions but instead on the messenger's ignorance of the content of his message. He can recount Tarquin's action without a clue as to its meaning. This emphasis on the ignorance of the messenger shows that Johannes is not focused single-mindedly on fear and trembling.

If Johannes is ignorant of the message he conveys, perhaps Kierkegaard knows what Johannes does not, that a walk through the illusion-filled tent is a prerequisite to a more religiously attuned walk – perhaps a walk through the woods, or through the paths of Frederiksberg Gardens, or along the paths of a cloister. [29] Perhaps being steeped in the illusions of Christendom is a nearly inescapable condition. If so, this massive fact must be learned. One must learn that the attractions of Christendom are just as illusory as the attractions of Tivoli. If Kierkegaard can show – subtly, discreetly, indirectly – that the fascination he can stir with tales of failed Abrahams is akin to the fascination stirred by a Tivoli side-show, then one attractive but false path to faith might be sealed off. This wouldn't guarantee that the true path would be spotted. But surely it's plausible that discovering that the immediately attractive path is false can be part of the required "training" or learning that is preliminary to finding faith.

A Deceptive Attunement

Attunement, Hannay's rendering of *Stemning*, delivers the justly famous Abraham sketches.[30] I will look at the opening to this section in great detail. It prefigures

29 Kierkegaard says that all of his writing has been composed "from the cloister," notwithstanding his constant appearance as a "man about town." See *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 35. In *Fear and Trembling*, the "shop-keeping," or "tax gathering" knight of faith strolls in the woods and about town, at ease in both settings. *FTP*, p. 69; *FT*, p. 39.

30 *FTP*, p 44. *Stemning* also has the sense of "mood," or "atmosphere."

the "mood" or "atmosphere" of the section as a whole.[31] And the mood is not one of faith, or faithful seeking, but the opposite of these. But before undertaking this close examination, let me make a brief remark about the Preface that precedes Attunement.[32]

It's striking that here in the Preface there is no mention of Abraham or his trial; there is no hint of a cause for fear and trembling, the purported theme of the text. Johannes de silentio offers a witty but rather commonplace complaint about the conceptual and spiritual confusions rampant among Copenhagen's fashionable cultural (and ecclesiastical) establishments. He complains that the market in ideas has fallen, that ideals are cheap, their price plummeting in a general "sell off" (and also, of course, a "sell out"). The most valuable item is as easily purchased as a trinket. Even faith and skepticism, not to mention political ideas, are bargain priced: it is the age of the slogan and the sound-bite.

The complaint is serious, but the tone is light and breezy, not at all pitched to fear or trembling. The engaging writer may raise some eyebrows, but his critique is not shocking: it's entertaining. This avoidance of religious pathos is not reversed, as we'd expect, but sustained in the following Attunement. Ironically, a religious pathos is even avoided as we approach, and then read through, the Abraham scenarios.

Attunement is a mood-setting or "lead-in" section that introduces a sequence of Abrahams who fail dramatically as fathers of faith. It also draws the unwary reader into the folly of hero worship and a quest for the spectacular. Each sketch is rendered as a fearful portrait of what that moment on Moriah might have been like. Each gives us a humanly plausible Abraham. But a humanly plausible Abraham is also, by faith's standard, a failed Abraham. A true Abraham cannot lie to his son, or fall into despair, or doubt the wisdom of God – options the scenarios depict. Each scene has a companion panel beneath depicting a mother and child. This gently defuses the terror of the father and son above. This series of two-part inventions is prefaced by an almost whimsical tale of a man who remembers a tale.

We should attend to beginnings, especially when a writer announces by his heading that he is setting a mood or atmosphere for all that will follow.

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31 Two welcome exceptions to a general neglect of Attunement, "the fable of the man" that opens it, and, more generally, the lyrical sections preceding the Problema, are Thomas A. Pepper, "Abraham: Who Could Possibly Understand Him?," in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook, 1996*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996; and Joakim Garff, "Johannes de Silentio: Rhetorician of Silence," in ibid. *Fear and Trembling* is taken to be one of Kierkegaard's most popular books. Yet in most English-language books on the pseudonymous authorship fail to give it more than passing reference. For documentation of this neglect, and an effort to reverse it, see my *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991. John Lippitt's recent book-length study marks a welcome shift: see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, London: Routledge, 2003.

32 I take Attunement as the second of four lyrical prefaces to the three strictly dialectical sections. Despite Kierkegaard's finally placing Preamble from the Heart (the Hongs' "Preliminary Expectoration") under the general heading Problemata, its lyricism makes it attach more naturally to the earlier sections of the book. Thus my count of four lyrical prefaces to the three dialectical Problema. Kierkegaard (like Hegel) was obsessed with how and where a story begins (or ends).

> There was once a man; he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for a second time received a son against every expectation.[33]

This is the dreamy, nostalgic mood of "Once upon a time . . ." Perhaps the man had this "beautiful story" read to him at bedtime. He remembers the tale, but his remembering it is itself a fable told by Johannes de silentio, starting with the familiar words of all children's stories, "Once upon a time . . . ." or "There was once a man . . ."

We expect such fairy tales, however gentle their starts, to include encounters with fabulous creatures of wonder, fear, or surprise – the fear typically cushioned by the comforting voice of the adult who reads and allows the child to approach fear without getting too scared. But the story at hand doesn't introduce us to dragons or wolves or thieves. Johannes reverses our expectations, for the man encounters only memory, his memory of a beautiful tale. And if we or the man sense an unnamed shadow ahead, we have Johannes' gentle consolation: "Don't be scared! All this is a fable! A fable about a fable!"

Of course, he knows something of what's to come, and so do we. But the beginning is magically, eerily, serene. There is not a word about sacrifice, or a knife, or the fear a listening child might suffer at the thought that he might be the object of his own father's dangerous thoughts.

The "story of the man" continues:

> When he became older he read the same story with even greater admiration, for his life had divided what had been united in the child's pious simplicity. The older he became the more often his thoughts turned to that tale, his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger, and yet less and less could he understand it. Finally, he put everything else out of his mind; his soul had but one wish, actually to see Abraham, and one longing, to have been witness to those events.[34]

The man confides that the story, so beautiful in his youth, has become an enigma.

Note that Johannes has buried the obvious question: "*How could this story of child sacrifice ever be 'beautiful' – to anyone, whatever their age?*" The man remembers no childhood fright. Even when he returns to it as an adult he is not frightened but – strange to say – full of enthusiasm and admiration. Admiration then shifts to a great longing to understand the object of his fascination. Strange again, he imagines he can satisfy his longing to understand by seeing Abraham – in person, as it were. Is this the right "atmosphere" for understanding the story of Abraham's trial? In place of fear and trembling, we have naive enthusiasm, admiration, and the desire to look.[35]

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33 *FTP*, p. 44; *FT*, p. 10f.

34 Ibid.

35 My reading of the "the man" departs significantly from Joakim Garff's in "Johannes de Silentio: Rhetorician of Silence." Garff takes this man musing on Abraham to be a "knight of faith" on a par with the shopkeeping (or tax collecting) knight. This underestimates the fact that the man is a fairy tale figure who only admires Abraham from a safe distance, and seeks only the spiritually questionable thrill of an Abraham-encounter, of watching a crisis.

The man confides that he longs to witness "these events"; we expect him to specify them. But like a skilled comedian who builds tension by teasingly delaying the punch line, Johannes dwells only on what he omits from the tale of his longing.

> It was not the beautiful regions of the East, nor the earthly splendor of the Promised Land, he longed to see, not the venerable figure of the patriarch stricken in years, not the youthful vigor God gave to Isaac – it would have been the same if it had taken place on a barren heath.[36]

To evoke "the beautiful regions of the East," Tivoli installed faux Chinese lanterns and pagoda-like structures.[37] Where else but in Tivoli would the pull of the "dreamy and exotic East" exist side by side with the funereal pull of Moriah? Tivoli has leveled the majestic, fearful grandeur of Mt Moriah to the amusing scale of sparkling ornaments. If we are fascinated by "the glittering East," then, of course, we will need an avuncular Johannes to guide us gently away from the temptation of the merely exotic. But it is not the devoutly faithful who need this gentle guidance. Those in need are precisely children immersed in fairy tales, children in the world of fantasy, or adults lost in the fantasy of a theme-park who are undecided among Moriah, a peep show, and a glittering mall.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard gives a more somber account of how "children" can become distracted from what is spiritually essential. George Pattison refers us to Kierkegaard's discourse, "Strengthening in the Inner Being," in which the spectacle of Rome's bread and circuses (Tivoli) is contrasted with the unnoticed, but momentous, entry of Paul into Rome.[38] We might suppose Johannes-Kierkegaard wants to lead us out of Tivoli toward Moriah. No such helpful guide led Rome's vacationing children away from the circuses to Paul.

Why does this man show no interest in Abraham's life apart from the crisis on Moriah? We'd think that an earnest reader on the trail of faith would want to see how Sarah and Abraham lived, whether and how they were faithful and God-fearing, how Abraham's great age contrasted with Isaac's vigor, and how that contrast affected the "venerable, yet stricken" Abraham. Why sweep this detail aside?

The issue is not whether to set aside "merely personal" information. The issue is whether to devalue exactly the detail we need to measure the extent of this couple's God-fearingness – and the extent of their faith in the promise and their delight in its fulfillment. These details are edited out because, in Johannes' view, the man wants – we all want – only to look: we want spectacle. But if we really want understanding, then looking, in the way this man wants to look, may be exactly what we shouldn't do.

Spectacle "stops time," takes our breath away, delivers a sublime "shudder of thought." Understanding this battered but venerable family – tried, blessed, and tried

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36 *FT*, p. 44.

37 Pattison *"Poor Paris!"*, p. 21. The park designer and impresario Carstensen's "passion for the Far East" was well known.

38 Ibid., p. 42.

again – requires us to take in an extended narrative.[39] But the man wants only the thrill of encounter, and Johannes seems uncritical of this wish – unless, of course, he (or Kierkegaard) is silently laughing at our (and this man's) naiveté and folly.

An analogy will accentuate the folly of this man's longing. We remember as a child seeing a high diver make a beautiful, bird-like descent from the tower to the pool. We remember her as an adult, and our enthusiasm and admiration increase – along with our inability to understand her performance. Then our deepest longing is to witness her dive again. How does she manage it with such grace from such a height! She parts the water without raising a ripple! (The dancing knight of faith lands on his feet without even the hint of a stumble.[40]) We imagine rushing to the pool just to see her dive – see it again. In that case, it's perfectly intelligible that stories of her youth or training, her family or wealth, become vastly irrelevant. We seek out only the thrilling moment that will take our breath away.

This analogy makes it clear that the man cannot be of faith, or even a man faithfully concerned to find faith. The reason is surprisingly obvious, once we see it. *It can be no part of moral-religious concern to "long to see" another's suffering. Watching others suffer or grieve is the opposite of faithfully keeping watch with them in their hour of need.* Johannes seems to have his categories "turned on their head." The man's yearning for the thrill of seeing a human and spiritual crisis is made no more objectionable than our gasping in amazement at the glorious (and dangerous) leap of a high tower aerial act.

How did we get shunted away from faith? Johannes has reversed categories on us (in this case, substituting aesthetic excitement for faith's passion) – while simultaneously he pretends to keep them distinct. Perhaps he is a victim of his own "infinite irony," his iterative reversals undoing both a personal and a textual center. Nevertheless, Johannes (or perhaps it is Kierkegaard) might have a secret and more acceptable aim. Advancing such confusion, with luck, might provoke us, or give us the opportunity, to uncover the confusion. And to expose this perversion of faith piece by piece, would be a legitimate test of our active resistance to the many-faceted charms of these illusions.

One can long for an exemplar of faith who might mark a path one could faithfully, resolutely follow in one's own individual manner. But longing to see a hero perform is something else entirely, a version of "celebrity-sighting," or of gawking at carnival aerial acts. In a different setting, ardent enthusiasm might be an expression of faithful devotion. But, in this setting, it has slipped into simple-minded hero-worship, a star-struck obsession. If religious fear and trembling were at issue, we would not be permitted the luxury of merely watching a dive from the tower. We'd be expected to

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39 Stripping away what preceded the stark journey to Moriah is stripping away everyday time, replacing it with the time of thrills, anxiety, and distraction. Tivoli had a (by our standards, primitive) roller-coaster. Peep shows shocked and fascinated. In Las Vegas the glitter of casinos, the lack of interior signs for entrances and exits, and the absence of standard spatially orienting "interior" features (for example, corridors), suppress the embarrassing "Where am I?" or "Why am I here?" in favor of attention to a correspondingly fixed and comforting orienting focus on the gaming table or slot machine, which makes an aesthetic answer to "Who am I?" or "Why am I here?" the only answer.

40 *FTP*, p. 70; *FT*, p. 41.

mount the tower ourselves and leap. Faith demands not the protected excitement of spectating (and speculation) but the risks of decision and doing. There is no evidence that the man has any inkling of this. He (and Johannes in the telling) has conflated the theatrics of hero-fixation with the passions of faith.[41]

Johannes concludes the first lengthy passage of Attunement on this note: "[W]hat occupied him [the old man] was not the finely wrought fabric of imagination, but the shudder of thought." Once more the real question is discarded. It's fine that the man rejects decorative imagination. But the main issue is ducked. Is this "shudder of thought" relevant to faith? Or, is it instead, only an aesthetic thrill, fitting in Tivoli but not on Moriah?

The man is quite clear that he seeks a visceral "shudder" at seeing Abraham look to the mountain and raise the knife – a rather suspect, voyeuristic desire. And if it were acceptable, its fulfillment would not make Abraham any more comprehensible. Seeing the high diver perform, we understand that she can do "the impossible." But so long as we're captured in the thrilling instant of encounter, we know nothing more about how she performs the marvel. A ring-side seat will suppress (rather than provide) understanding.[42] To understand, I'd think, would be to reflect on Abraham's humanity or fatherhood or faithfulness or husbandhood. Yet these concerns are typecast as simple diversions from "the one thing needed."

A paragraph break sets off Johannes' next short comment on the man and his memory.

> This man was no thinker, he felt no need to go further than faith. To be remembered as its father seemed to him to be surely the greatest glory of all, and to have it a lot to be envied even if no one else knew.[43]

This passage tempts us to conclude that, by disabling thought, this simple man is happily saved from the dangers of scholarship. Unfortunately, it also "saves" him from the "distraction" of being ordinarily thoughtful about his encounter.

More plausibly, the man avers that the crucial need is that Abraham be remembered as the father of faith: there is no additional glory in being awarded a place in world-history, or in being part of the advance of systematic knowledge. And he avers that if someone is of faith, no one else needs to be notified. Fair enough. A hero on the field of battle must be known as such by history. A simple peasant utterly unknown

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41 Both Garff and Pepper overlook the fact that the fable of the man leads us decisively away from a proper religious attunement to Abraham or to faith.

42 The man's wish might be not just gawking, or celebrity chasing, but an awkward instance of the kind of yearning for "the anxious sublime" described by George Pattison in "Kierkegaard and the Sublime," in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook, 1998*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998. But that, too, would be a yearning for an encounter that so floods consciousness that the need and capacity for understanding utterly dissolves. And we'd have to ask whether Kierkegaard wants to endorse such a thorough-going and consciously pursued suppression of the search for understanding. For more on ethics and the sublime, see Chapter Ten.

43 *FT*, p. 44.

to history can be nevertheless exemplary of faith. Understandably, the man has no wish to publicize "these events," or to hand them over to paragraph reapers.

But – isn't it reasonable, all the same, to expect that someone working to establish a "second immediacy" through recalling the faith of his youth would also want to share his tale of struggles and fulfillments with a neighbor or a neighbor's child? Wouldn't he want to retell the story, as it was retold to him? If not, his wish to have Abraham "be remembered" boils down to a minimalist "be remembered by me." This locks the man into a narrow and uncharitable solipsism. Can he be utterly indifferent to whether the next generation becomes acquainted with the glory of Abraham's test? It's not essential that beauty or faith become secret. And furthermore, how could such a desire to keep a secret be distinguished from possessiveness, from selfish hoarding?

Despite the fact that Johannes will say later that God created the poet and hero together as a bulwark against nihilism,[44] perhaps Johannes de silentio's first misstep is conceiving of Abraham as a hero – precisely the sort of figure one admires and longs to see in person, but need not follow. And perhaps Johannes' second misstep is to permit himself the thought that since the hero needs the poet to celebrate him, then the role of the applauding poet is – dare we say it – more important than the daring exploits of the heroic performer.

This passage depicting the interdependence of poet and hero, which opens the Speech in Praise of Abraham, illustrates, yet once more, the elusiveness of Johannes' identity, and his capacity to "shift aspects" almost instantaneously. Thus Johannes begins by saying the hero is the poet's "better nature" – as if deed were more central than song, and the poet only a "lowly" admirer of the hero who alone is capable of action. Yet in the flash of a few sentences, it turns out that the hero would drop into oblivion without the poet, who transfigures memory to make the hero immortal. Here the poet's power seems to overshadow the hero's.

How about the identity of the man telling this tale of a tale? His acquiescence in silence seems to reverse Johannes' later celebration of the poet's calling as a publicist. Perhaps this man is not a kind of poet despite his whimsical, dreamy recollections. Is the man perhaps a silenced poet? But if silence is a kind of hoarding (keeping the secret from others), then it's a vice. Perhaps the man is as hard to pin down as Johannes de silentio is. He wants to stalk heroes and to keep it a secret. He also wants to "merge" with his hero. As Johannes has it, the man "descends the mountain" more than once. This might mean only that he has managed to accompany Abraham in his ascents and descents. But it also might mean, more dangerously, that in his dream the man has become Abraham: their identities have merged.

To confuse the issue of identity even more, Johannes will tell us later that the poet is a "torturer of heroes."[45] Well, who is this man that Johannes invents to introduce Attunement? Is this man who remembers a tale a poet? If so, of what sort? A praiser of heroes? A poet-become-hero? A silenced poet? A mere dreamer? A torturer of heroes? As we might expect, Johannes is silent; and also trying our patience.

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44 *FTP*, p. 49; *FT*, p. 15.

45 *FTP*, p. 134; *FT*, p. 109.

We have arrived at the final sentence of Attunement's short preface to the quartet of Abraham sketches: "This man was no learned exegete, he knew no Hebrew; had he known Hebrew then perhaps it might have been easier for him to understand the story of Abraham." Here, within a single sentence, Johannes reverses himself. At first it's a good thing that the old man is not a scholar, not a "learned exegete." Then in mid-stream we encounter the thought that if he had learned Hebrew (i.e. become something of a scholar) perhaps his exegetical skills would help him understand Abraham.

If it's enough to have faith thrust on us by radical, "thrilling" exposure to an encounter that takes our breath and thought away, what difference could knowing Hebrew make? What would a better translation reveal? That God *didn't* ask for Isaac?

Instead of a Biblical tale, we start with a fairy tale of a man remembering one. Instead of wanting to understand the father of faith by seeing him in context, the old man wants only to see "the events." Instead of wanting to see the event to understand it, he seeks a "shudder of thought" that will deaden his capacity to thoughtfully assess and comprehend. Now these more or less subtle anomalies are followed by a piece of even more blatant irony or theatrics. Could encountering Abraham be less puzzling if we tidied our translations?

With that wink about Hebrew, Johannes steps out of character as merely the teller of a tale to make an ironic remark directed at anyone who might believe that only the lack of better scholarship keeps the irritating puzzles of a text alive – as if, in the hands of a scholar of genius, the enduring puzzles would disappear under the bright lights of flawless interpretation. The text would become transparent, fostering the mad illusion that *life* had been cleared up. It's as if the scholar thinks that if he can only become adequate to the rebellious text, smoothing out its wrinkles, somehow *life* would thereby be tamed. But a transparent text would cripple that text's capacity to address life, which is anything *but* transparent. Smoothing out roughness in interpretation, if it levels the text, thereby drains the text of any bearing it might have on the roughness and opacities of life.

Moriah, a Lesson, and Other Themes

Johannes becomes a voice against the grain of the fable he relates, kibitzing satirically. But once he has let himself wink at us publicly this way, the possibility is opened for us to question what his role has been all along. If his remark about Hebrew is a gag, perhaps the "fable of the old man" is also something like a gag. How can it help ease or clarify religious puzzlement to encounter Abraham wrapped in a fanciful story of a man who encounters a childhood memory of a beautiful bedtime story? It seems more likely that *Abraham*'s distinction as the father of faith is leveled, deflated, by these meandering, iterative retreats from the issues. We seem to have what Johannes himself aptly calls "marketing a cut-rate Abraham."[46]

46 *FTP*, p. 82; *FT*, p. 53.

Despite the largely negative outcome of Johannes de silentio's search for Abraham's faith, I think there is a lesson to be drawn from these abortive attempts. And in addition to this lesson, there are other substantial results we can credit Johannes with clarifying despite his misadventures. But before summing up the lesson and the subordinate themes, I should comment briefly on the four Abraham sketches. After all, the text we've been finely combing is the introduction to precisely these sketches.

We have four imaginative versions of the man's Abraham-encounters. What did he really see? It seems he saw all four laid out one by one in sequence. There are four mutually incompatible encounters, each an imaginative variation on the bare-bones skeleton of a Biblical scenario. As we become immersed in the tangible persuasiveness of each, our sense of a "real world event" to which one or two of these might correspond begins to shrink in credibility. Each variation becomes vivid in the way a sequence of theatrical performances can be – four theatrical realizations of a minimalist script. Each on-stage performance is a distinguishable event, and we have to judge its plausibility and effectiveness without having access to an extra-theatrical event. The performances Kierkegaard stages are not correct (or incorrect) renditions of an historical event – Abraham taking his son up a mountain in obedience to God. They're realizations of an only skeletal script, barren of the detail a workable performance would require. The realizations *might* have a real-life counterpart, but that's something we can never know, and needn't. In that respect, they're like a repeated dream or fantasy, where the narratives might have a rough real-world counterpart, but need to be interpreted in their own terms. The importance of a dream or fantasy isn't its one-to-one correspondence to any real-life scenario (though rough parallels might obtain).

All four variations leap out dramatically. Each evokes the sort of encounter we might have in a set of theatrical performances, or a set of dreams or fantasies, or a set of portraits in a gallery – or in a Tivoli side-show, a Biblical panorama with four amazing real-life sets!

The first scenario has Abraham try initially to comfort Isaac, but to no avail. Isaac "clung to his knees" pleading for his life. Abraham changes tactics. He turns away from and then back toward his son, now looking like a madman, shouting that he is not a loving father doing God's will, but a monster pleasing himself.

Then there is the contrasting mood of the appended mother-child refrains:

> When the child is to be weaned the mother blackens her breast, for it would be a shame were the breast to look pleasing when the child is not to have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed but the mother is the same, her look loving and tender as ever. Lucky the one that needed no more terrible means to wean the child![47]

Let's take the sequence of scenarios not as a staged theater or gallery exhibit, but as a sequence of dreams or daydreams. It's a repetitive dream that never quite works out. And each repeated episode has an intruding, reversing afterthought or counter-fantasy: the nightmare of the father's upraised knife is halted by a more reassuring

47 *FTP*, p. 46; *FT*, p. 10.

dream of being held by a mother, who offers a breast for nourishment, offers evident love, and comfort, even as she "blackens her breast."

I would tell this repeated fantasy of father-son paired with mother-infant in this way. Each time the old man awoke from the shudder of his dream, he heard a strangely comforting voice and knew then that he was no longer under his father's knife, nor was he a father about to wield it against a son, nor was he an onlooker transfixed in wonder at the events before him. He was in his mother's arms, and was told by a voice from some hidden spot that he would be soon weaned from her breast, but that there was no need to fear, for she was still present, her love still tangible.

And as the man dreamed, he was unsure whether he was dreaming of Abraham or walking with Abraham, or was strangely merged with Abraham, for as he descended the Mountain, he was dull with fatigue. But was it his soul that was numb from these events he had witnessed, or his limbs that were numb from the effort of the ascent – or was he unsure, as in a dream, what exactly was happening? One might also feel this sort of fatigue and disorientation having been present at an especially effective theatrical presentation, or in the shadowed interior of a chamber of amazing illusions at Tivoli.

With time enough, we could continue to plot the poetic reversals and enigmas of each of these four retellings. As we have seen, the first has Abraham pretend to be a maniac. Another has him waver in doubt, and another has him perform his duty, but with his fist clenched in despair. But I should mention, in leaving this close reading behind, that even as Johannes de silentio completes this four-part sequence, he does not forget his motif. Throughout his extended journey through the Praising Speech, the Preamble from the Heart, and the dialectical sections, he continues to invent imaginative variations on the theme of "these events." I count at least twelve.

One version has Abraham thrust the knife into his own breast;[48] another has him dispensing with the trouble of a three-day journey and dispatching Isaac more efficiently at home.[49] There is one that has Abraham traveling too fast to the appointed site.[50] In another he backs off, saying, in effect, "If it's so important, then You do it!"[51] In another, God strikes Isaac dead.[52] All the versions Johannes can think up get it wrong. If God is the standard of getting it right, we know that Johannes, like Judge Wilhelm, is always getting it wrong.

We can now move back from the sketches to the opening lines that precede them, to the man remembering a childhood tale. The fable's concluding aside, that the man might have benefited from knowing Hebrew, is surely a gag. And in this light, it can seem not that far-fetched to take the tale of the man to be "rigged" through and through – a gag or amusing diversion. Nevertheless, irony or satire aside, these passages preserve, or convey, important points. There is far too much impressive material left in the text for us to end up at the close of the venture holding only the

48 *FTP*, p. 54; *FT*, p. 21.
49 *FTP*, p 66; *FT*, p. 36.
50 *FTP*, p. 80; *FT*, 52.
51 *FTP*, p. 62; *FT*, p. 32.
52 *FTP*, p. 143; *FT*, p. 119.

picture of *Fear and Trembling* as a Tivoli extravaganza. Behind the theatrics there lies a complementary lyric tending toward faith.

The gist of the lesson so far would go something like this. *Beware the folly of wanting to chase down a childhood hero, and the folly of pursuing "the shudder of thought" one anticipates in his presence – exemplars of faith are not to be confused with heroes. Beware thinking you can capture an exemplar of faith like an archeological find. Whatever the thrill of a find, or the thrill of secreting it from others, faith cannot be possessed like a find.*[53]

By exposing the hero-worship, the lure of the spectacular, and the danger of confusing theatrics for faith, we form an idea of what faith must resist. And if we also have some unsayable hold on what Johannes de silentio has left out or keeps hidden (the dark center of faith), we are by that fact better acquainted with our incapacities and ignorance. Not a bad thing.

Now let me lay out some of the other themes Johannes has assembled. Granted that he only meanders toward the purported topic, and makes this meander more than a little theatrical, and then fails to give us a definitive version of Abraham that we can grasp, nevertheless Johannes' "comic" or "ironic" rambling approach gives him time and space to show wisdom amidst folly.[54]

His oblique approach allows Kierkegaard (or Johannes) a chance at culture criticism (notably in the Preface). It gives him a chance to contrast the simple man of faith with the sophisticated exegete, with praise going to the former. It gives him a chance to invent the genre of "dialectical lyric," as the four lyric scenarios dialectically oppose each other, and all are opposed to faith; and as the lyrical tale of the old man's remembering a childhood tale is dialectically opposed by his later wish to understand, which itself is opposed by his subsequent wish to have his understanding broken in a "shudder of thought." All of this, in turn, is opposed by his apparent indifference to reporting what he sees. And this indifference or reticence is then followed by an opposite lyricism in his sketches of "those events." And the entire lyrical-dialectical opening half of the book is in tension with the more obviously dialectical second half, the Hegelian troika of Problema.

The peculiarity of his approach allows Kierkegaard/Johannes to enact the romantic idea of the play of all the faculties in a sensitive, responsive human. One does not pass, Hegel-like, from art to religion to knowledge, but, rather, one embodies

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53 I argue that faith can't be searched out, and recovered like a find but only received in Chapter Nine. In Chapter Ten I argue that our faith places us as if in the presence of the sublime – what I call "the ethical sublime," where faith is an aspect of our aspiration and readiness for our next and better self.

54 The moral to a story can be distinguished from its motive, and an author can be in the dark in varying degrees about either. Some might find an unflattering motive behind *Fear and Trembling* – hiding a biographical reality, or, more intriguingly, hiding a purely entertaining and fame-seeking desire to be the storyteller who can tell the most arresting and enigmatic tale possible, resisting all closure, a tale that would make his name immortal, while all along he has the cover of being a man of silence, perhaps even a religious writer. There could be a religious moral nevertheless hidden in the text. Johannes de silentio might be ignorant of the moral he conveys even as the messenger from Tarquin the Proud in all ignorance relays a vital truth.

Climacus' *Postscript* ideal: the subjective thinker will have artistry, dialectics, ethics, and religious passion simultaneously engaged.[55] The whole person is addressed and the whole person responds.

These feints and parries allow the author to establish the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime, as the old man's memory of the tale changes from a "beautiful tale" to a sublime "shudder of thought." And they underscore the troubling unclarity which we endure as we try honestly to sustain "purity of heart" in our own case. How trustworthy can we be in this endeavor, when we have such a stake in the outcome? The crucial distinction will most likely pass us by – the distinction between a religious fear and trembling (as in Genesis 22) and an aesthetic fear and trembling, say the thrill of opening our latest mystery novel.

Presenting a spin of perspectives and standpoints allows Kierkegaard (or Johannes) to activate and engage our interests. We enter, and as important, *depart* the fantastic world of these events without a comforting, stabilizing slogan, doctrine or definitive interpretation of them. This preserves our interpretative and volitional freedom.

And this spin of perspectives keeps alive for us the enigma of founding moments, of grounding relationships, of the opaqueness of all stories of beginnings, whether of states, or persons, or responsibility, or faith – whether of the Fall, or of the Social Contract, or of the Platonic City built in imagination, or of Judge Wilhelm's "Choosing to choose," or of Anti-Climacus "Being grounded in Another." Johannes de silentio goes so far as to claim that the poet may be "self-founding" – at least that's one way to read his claim that "the one who works gives birth to his own father."[56] These enigmas do not just disappear or dissolve in their recounting.

By "the opaqueness of all stories of beginnings" I have in mind the following sorts of questions which, by definition, in stories of beginnings, cannot be answered unproblematically. If the Garden is a place of innocence, why is a serpent placed in it to tempt the innocent? If making a social contract is required to protect us from the natural untrustworthiness of others, why do we trust the signers to stand by their word or signature? How can we found an uncorrupted city when all available for the task of founding and administrating are corrupt? (Socrates suggests exiling everyone over ten years old!) What good is it to *actual* persons to found a city only in *imagination*? If the aesthete has trouble choosing, what good is the advice that he needs to choose, or choose to choose? If I need footing for an identity I can call my own, what good does it do to become grounded in another? If I need a relationship of love with a son and of fidelity to my God, how can giving up that son and suffering the apparent infidelity of my God, ground my love and my faith?

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55 *CUP*, p. 351. "The subjective thinker is not a scientist scholar; . . . he is esthetic enough for his life to have esthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to master it." And, of course, the subjective thinker has a religious passion for "an objective uncertainty."

56 *FTP*, p. 57; *FT*, p. 27. Johannes does not tell us, and it would help to know, whether the "work" of "self-creating" is poetic, religious, or religious-poetic – or perhaps the line in question is another dead-end diversion.

These enigmas trigger the deepest reflection and swirl in a chaos that repels easy solution – perhaps *any* real solution. Perhaps there can *be* no *believable* stories of beginnings – stories that survive critical reflection. Profound questions can drive the spirit without granting access to satisfactions or solutions. If God holds the questions in the left hand, and answers in the right, then it seems that we are meant, as Kierkegaard and Lessing would agree, to live with the questions, forever without answers. After all, in this strange image, even God has not abandoned the questions. Yet if the answers are adequate, why *keep* the questions alive and well? Perhaps the assurances of his right hand don't really quell the anxious tumult in his left.

This issue of the founding of selves and states returns us to the issue of identities, the unraveling and reweaving of identities throughout *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes' style of reversals and doublings-back keeps his identity a secret. He presents himself as a showman, offering spectacular views of The Amazing Sublime, sights that we – and he – can view at a safe distance. Yet he also leaves open the possibility that he might be on the way to faith, perhaps half way there, or even, heaven forbid, a knight of faith. He says he can't understand Abraham and can't "make the movements of faith" (quite separate inabilities). On the other hand, who has ever understood Abraham better than Johannes does? And as an ironist, he possesses the perfect cover for faith.[57] If he has it, he can disguise his faith in the claim that he lacks it.

For Johannes Climacus, Humor is faith's incognito (as Alastair Hannay reminds me[58]). Could it be that, for Johannes de silentio, Irony is faith's incognito? Who he is and what his intentions are remain a riddle to us. This riddle suspends him (hence his readers) in a troubling pathos. Johannes' peculiar two-minded way of expression leaves us wrestling the enigmas of identity. Modern identities, even postmodern ones, seem to advance only as they retreat from misplaced aspirations, seem to resolve only in the shadow of discord, or in deep loss and silence. They remain, especially for their bearers, irresolvable riddles. They are riddles as opaque as Abraham or Johannes, and remain so, despite (or perhaps because of) our reading through (once more) the labyrinth of *Fear and Trembling* – a book that makes its author immortal precisely through its glittering display and subtle enactment of these hauntingly familiar yet terribly unsettling opacities and disturbances of spirit.

57 I owe this insight (while slightly transposing its context), to Pattison.

58 The thought that Johannes de silentio assumes an "ironic incognito" is suggested in *FT*, p. 252. But this does not settle whether what the disguise masks is faith, or, instead, is banality, or despair, or some other way of being. For a discussion of the contrasts among the comic, ironic, and humorous, see Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and What We Mean by 'Philosophy'," in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, New York: Routledge, 2003, Chapter 1.

CHAPTER NINE

Repetition: Gifts in World-Renewal: Repetition is Requited Time

a droll little book,
dashed off as an oddity.
– Papers, 1843

Kierkegaard's slim book *Repetition* was published in 1843 on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*.[1] Six weeks later he published a discourse on *The Book of Job*.[2] The theme of sudden loss and wondrous restoration recurs: Abraham must release Isaac and then he gets him back; Job is stripped of his world and then he gets it back. The book *Repetition* alludes to Job's yearning for his world's return and also depicts the suffering of a young man who has lost his love and yearns for her return. These motifs provide a clue to the concept of repetition. The question posed by *Repetition* is whether repetition is possible, whether a world or loved one, now lost, can be restored, or more generally, whether lost time can be requited.

Preliminaries

Repetition is a story of lost love but also a dialectical inquiry into a fundamental metaphysical concept. As the author Constantine Constantius has it, "repetition" is a particularly modern concept meant to contrast with Platonic recollection (an alternate path to recapturing value lost). It's also paired with *kinesis*, the Aristotelian "motion" of becoming, and it is marked as "the task of freedom."[3] It's both "the *interest* of

1 *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983 (hereafter *Repetition*). See also *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985 (hereafter *FTP*).

2 What I call the "Discourse on Job" (or "Job Discourse") is the first of Kierkegaard's *Four Upbuilding Discourses*, originally published December 6, 1843; the given title is the Biblical heading from Job, "The Lord Gave and The Lord Took Away." This discourse is collected in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 109-24.

3 *Soren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, I-XI, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 1st edn, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-70), IV, B 108 (hereafter, *Pap*.). Portions are collected in "Selected Entries from Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Pertaining to *Repetition*," in Hongs' *Repetition*, p. 324 (hereafter, Supplement).

metaphysics and the interest on which all metaphysics comes to grief."[4] So a love story is only half of the story. These dialectical remarks are largely undeveloped, inserted casually, perhaps even ironically, within a book that for the most part reads as a puzzling *roman à clef* or novella. Metaphysical theory (or anti-theory) floats precariously on a complex literary surface. The idea of repetition seems serious enough, yet it often seems to flicker as an artifice or entertainment. Of all the Kierkegaardian terms of art, Walter Lowrie confides, none ". . . is more important and none so baffling" as repetition.[5] In a typical gesture of dismissal, Kierkegaard writes that the novella is "insignificant, without any philosophical pretension, a droll little book, dashed off as an oddity . . ." – a jest meant to throw us off balance.[6]

Why does Kierkegaard complicate and conceal his intentions? He was immersed in the stories of Job and Abraham, writing the "Job Discourse," *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*, just as he was breaking off his engagement to Regine – and then belatedly considering reconciliation, wishing to regain old times.[7] Job and Abraham were beneficiaries of a wondrous return; if they were requited, he too might be eligible for repetition. But it would be awkward, to say the least, for this wish to become public so soon after the scandal – and what if that wish, for whatever reason, was at best but half-hearted?

Kierkegaard has other reasons to complicate and conceal his intentions. As we've seen, he's Socratically called to address the spiritual disarray of his proudly modern and enlightened city. *Repetition* will play a part in his critique of Copenhagen.[8] A direct attack was possible, but more subtle means are available, as well. He adopts a familiar literary form, the novella, or *roman à clef*, to capture the interest of his readers, which disarms their defenses. A disquieting critique arrives in friendly disguise.[9] In *Repetition* we're handed a casual novella that recounts the yearnings

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4 *Repetition*, p. 149.

5 See Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 630. David Cain provides a revealing list of ways in which "repetition" – *Gjentagelse* in the Danish – has been characterized by Kierkegaard scholars: ". . . a burning bush that is not consumed"; "the Christian idea of a 'new creature'"; " in the act of repetition [the existing individual] becomes what he is"; "Repetition is to give thanks always." See David Cain, "Notes on a Coach Horn: 'Going Further,' 'Revocation,' and *Repetition*," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993, p. 338f.

6 *Pap.* IV, B 120; Supplement, 324.

7 While page-proofs for *Repetition* were being set, Kierkegaard learned that Regine had become engaged to someone else. Realizing that there was now no way for him to undo his "sacrifice" or to regain her, he ripped out the final pages of *Repetition* and rewrote them.

8 Kierkegaard dropped his strategies of concealment in the last phase of his critique, in what has been called his "attack" literature. See, for example, *Attack on Christendom*, trans. and intro. Walter Lowrie, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, and *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves*, trans. and intro. Walter Lowrie, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944.

9 In addition, it's unclear how one effects deep critique while avoiding complication and concealment. The conceptual resources available for critique are embedded in the very languages and traditions he finds corrupt. If Kierkegaard advances the potential of the idea he calls repetition, he must speak in the flawed language, evoking the flawed perceptions and

of a love-sick youth and delivers off-hand asides about Greek philosophy and the sufferings of Job. But it's a Trojan Horse from which a critique of casual musing *itself* can enter the cultural stronghold.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard needs space to let his ideas alter and grow, space to experiment. Disguise and indirection give him that space. He needs authorial distance to alter, complicate, or revise his views without having to go on record spelling out the exact nature of the change. He may himself be uncertain of the precise extent of a concept's development or complication.[10] Concepts change with the context of their elucidation. Kierkegaard's literary, moral, and philosophical intentions undergo revision.

A perverse "repetition" of seductions appears in the discussion of Don Giovanni in *Either/Or*.[11] A more acceptable repetition-like movement is proposed by Judge Wilhelm, who warns the aesthete to "choose himself," to choose the ethical.[12] The anticipated "metamorphosis" is a retaking or restoration of the detail of one's life, reviving or repeating it under an ethical frame.[13] But these early accounts are misleading.[14] The Judge's view of repetition as self-choice fails because he assumes

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understandings of the very world he wishes to undo. In this light, irony and disguise, which mimic the defenses the author wants to penetrate, can seem unavoidable.

10 See Alastair Hannay's useful discussion of alternative ways of construing Kierkegaard's complex vacillation in how he should himself assess his *Either/Or* in the light of his later work and life-decisions: "The Judge in the Light of Kierkegaard's own Either/Or: Some Hermeneutical Crochets," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary*: *Either/Or*, *Part II*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, pp. 183-205.

11 *Either/Or*, *Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 75ff., and 302ff. See also *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, abridg. and trans. intro. Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworthand New York: Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 60-135 and 247-376. The discussion of Don Giovanni is found in the section titled "The Musical Erotic."

12 *Either/Or*, *Part II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, "The Balance Between The Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality," pp. 155ff. See also *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life,* trans. Hannay, "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality," pp. 247ff.

13 See my "Self-Choice or Self-Reception: Judge William's Admonition," in Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*: *Either/Or*, *Part II*, pp. 5-31.

14 In his papers, Kierkegaard distinguishes different stages in the development of the concept of repetition, corresponding roughly to aesthetic, ethical, and religious versions; he admits that the earlier versions distract us from the authentic religious sense, introduced later. See *Pap.* IV, B 117; Supplement pp. 301f. Roger Poole correctly challenges Thulstrup's oversimplified contrast between a "merely poetic" and a "religious" repetition, but he goes too far in his claim that the text of *Repetition* does not itself give us internal grounds for distinguishing quasi-religious from trivially non-religious versions of the concept. We are surely justified in ranking Constantine's frivolous trip to Berlin as a "lower" interest than the young man's "higher" tormented interest in the return of his beloved. Furthermore, the text of *Repetition* may not give us all we need to understand the concept "repetition": "The Job Discourse" and *Fear and Trembling* are surely central here, as well as Kierkegaard's papers. (See, for example, *Pap.* IV, A 178; Supplement, 336, where Constantine's Berlin journey

that self-consolidation can be readily achieved by choosing, a view reversed in Kierkegaard's accounts of Job and Abraham. He calls their repetitions "repetition in the pregnant sense," received as grants of life and world and not an outcome to be cornered.[15] True repetition is what Johannes de silentio, in *Fear and Trembling*, calls faith's "second movement," the return of Isaac, the beloved, and worldly life.[16]

What's in a Name?

Some variations on the theme are hidden in the name Kierkegaard chooses for *Repetition*'s author, "Constantine Constantius." The name is a repetition, repeating eponymously the tension between something *constant* (an element to be repeated) and *motion* (something repeated), and might also call to mind someone steadfast, a pillar of strength on whom to rely. Constantius does appear as an anchor, at least to his young friend shaken by an unhappy love who confides his pain in a series of confidential letters collected in the second part of *Repetition*. Or the name recalls one who *seeks* constancy, has this as his goal, rather than one who has achieved it. Constantius finds himself making a "psychological experiment," seeking constancy through repetition. He would corner it intellectually, reproduce it experientially. If the notion of repetition has substance, he thinks, he ought to be able to relive his fondly remembered experience of a trip to Berlin. Thus we follow Constantius' comical attempt to get things back the way they were on an earlier outing.

Yet another angle would have the constancy of Constantius indicate an existential *complacency*. To a disinterested observer he seems a rather hollow figure, a questionable friend with all too glib advice. His "interest" in repetition can seem half-hearted. His idle play with repetition is nothing compared to the terrifying, gripping *need* of repetition that overwhelms Abraham or Job. Constantine's facile counsel, his philosophical flourishes, his side trip to Berlin are little more than aesthetic diversions, all undertaken with suspect ease.

The Dialectical Issue: Mediation

Repetition opens with Constantine's lectures on pagan versus Christian views of time and redemption of value. He confidently announces that repetition is "the new

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is characterized as a farce.) For his critique of any attempt to make sense of "repetition," see Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993, p. 72f. Also, see my "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse: Getting back the World," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 34: (151-69), 1993.

15 See *Pap*. IV, B 111; Supplement, p. 294.

16 Of course, the *concept* of repetition, although not named as such, is central to *Fear and Trembling* as well as to the "Job Discourse." A connection, and contrast, between *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* could be put schematically in this way. By challenging both conventional and rational accounts of ethical value, *Fear and Trembling* raises an ontology of value, launching it above and beyond conventional, Hegelian, Kantian, or utilitarian accounts. *Repetition* raises the question of human access *to* that realm of special, saving value.

category that will be discovered."[17] It will overtake the fashionable Hegelian reliance on "mediation" and will be found superior to Greek "recollection." Repetition, mediation, and recollection are alternative solutions to the problem of transition or motion, especially, transitions in self-realization. If Hegelian "mediation" were the key to motion from an aesthetic to an ethical way of life, we'd expect a pattern of "immanent negations."[18] Imagine an initial state where an infant and its surroundings are largely undifferentiated. In the course of time, this initial condition gets "negated" – an individual emerges through opposition to its context, perhaps through the rebellions of adolescence against family and society, for example. In this scenario, differentiation can lead to an increasing sense of alienation. With further growth, this rootlessness may itself be negated – the matrix of civic morality and association supervenes. Notice that this pattern of becoming is general or universal; its goal is "moral," construed as the assimilation of modes of cultural and civic decency or propriety; it is exclusively natural or immanent; and it proceeds by negations.

Constantine mocks this "1, 2, 3," dance step of Hegelian dialectic.[19] General or universal schemes of moral advance bury the crucial factor of individual choice, of personal involvement in moral progress: to aim for assimilation is a tawdry substitute for continuing individuation; a purely immanent process excludes the "transcendent" interventions and bestowals familiar even in secular experience (say, in moments of falling in love or in encountering the sublime); and, finally, to characterize personal "motion" or advance as powered exclusively through "negation" is distorting – affirmation can be an engine of advance. In *Either/Or*, an *individual* self will choose or receive itself, making decision and responsibility paramount. Choice is positive, and draws on powers higher than itself.[20] Development is not just a natural historical process, but one interfused with spirit.

If this disposes of the Hegelian account of movement as mediation, there is still Platonic recollection to contend with. Constantius avers, "If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty meaningless noise."[21] Preserving time is preserving meaning. To avoid the disintegration of life into a meaningless hubbub, do we really need a "new category"?

Recollection Back, Repetition Ahead

For Plato, we move toward the Good by "recollection," by contact with a Form, a meaning source that already exists in some static "past eternity," a good that becomes accessible in memory through Socratic questioning. This escape from noise would be "backward" to a timeless past. In contrast, Kierkegaard offers a forward, future-

17 *Repetition*, p. 148.

18 Constantine Constantius is not a completely reliable guide to Hegel. For a good discussion of the (disputed) character of Hegelian dialectic, see Michael Forster, "Hegel's Dialectic Method," in Frederick C. Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 130-70.

19 *Repetition*, p. 226.

20 See my "Self Choice or Self-Reception."

21 *Repetition*, p. 149.

oriented move toward God or a Good of open possibilities.[22] Repetition is not just a grant of one's familiar life, a frozen replica of the past (now devoid of noise and chatter). It is the delivery of new and surprising, forward-looking possibilities in the "past-times" of one's life. God appears to Job in a Whirlwind to breath life into familiar things – horses, seas – that had died in his life. Job's "past time" is requited as bountiful *possibility*. In the context of Abraham, what is new and surprising is Isaac's return, but the Isaac is the familiar Isaac of past time, now retrieved, received, and renewed.

Constantine claims that repetition and recollection are the *same* movement, but in opposite directions. Repetition is "recollection forward." This formulation is not exactly transparent, but it can be unpacked.[23] Take a movement toward meaning or value, a gathering of meaning to the present. When this gathering reaches back for lost sense, we recollect. When we *anticipate* this gathering with arms open toward the future, then we expect repetition. Repetition is a *waiting* for reception, for meaning gathered less from a vibrant past than received as possibility from a promising future. The fact that one *gathers* is the same, we could say, and *what* is gathered is the same (the familiar, the very world we've lost). But recollection gathers from a source of dark memory, while in repetition one finds oneself gathering unexpected gifts of possibility from the future.

Passionless Curiosity

Constantine waxes professorial, declaring, "repetition is the *interest* of all metaphysics and the interest on which it founders"[24] – an insight to which we'll return. But the theoretical vein soon drys up. He shifts from unveiling his "new category" to wondering if the whole business of repetition might be illusory. The question, "What is repetition?" is replaced by the question, "Is repetition possible?" This inconstant, vacillating author changes his question and then changes his approach. On a whim, he sets off to find his answer not by continuing his philosophical and poetic reflections but by embarking on a journey. His task will be to replicate, to *try to repeat*, the experiences of an earlier journey.

His return to Berlin is rendered in detail. There is a jolting coach ride to the city, a visit to the theater and a fondly remembered café. We meet the now-married German hotel manager, his previous host. Constantine shows off his talent for evocative description, an interest in storytelling magic replacing his promise of an experimental test that in turn had replaced a dialectical exploration. And just as he shifts gears from his professorial exegesis to his mesmerizing travelogue, Constantine warns that his whole interest in repetition may be a trick, a farce. Quoting Hamann with approval, he says:

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22 For an excellent discussion of types of repetition, see Stephen Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment: Recollection, Repetition, and Eternal Recurrence," in Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, p. 225-46.

23 Hence Roger Poole's dismissal of "recollection forward" is premature. See *Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication*, p. 63.

24 *Repetition*, p. 149.

> [I] express myself in various tongues and speak the language of sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of whites and Moors and Creoles, and babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, *rebus*, and axioms, and argue now in a human way and now in an extraordinary way.[25]

Yet he also asks us to believe that what he says "is not a mere lie."[26]

Perhaps Constantine is like a soldier returning nostalgically to a scene of battle, or like a lover returning to old haunts, hoping for a glimpse of the beloved. If so, we would expect a yearning, a wish for roots and the familiar where he could be the self he once was, and thus put an end to the ache of exile and aimless wandering. But Constantine has no ache or longing. There's no drama or suffering in his search for a return of the familiar. Only *curiosity* moves him to try the coffee across town at a favorite shop.[27]

Fear and Trembling pitches repetition at unbearable intensity. Abraham's hope that Isaac will be restored, his expectation of repetition, is not just a curiosity about *whether* he'll be returned. Abraham's ordeal is not on an "experiment" to validate an hypothesis. Or consider Job's grief, his ache for repetition. Constantine neither needs Berlin nor grieves its loss. The experiment is whimsy.

In the opening pages, Constantine seemed to take seriously his "new category" destined to replace recollection and mediation, restoring passion and life to a dampened world. But now it seems his talk may be only puns and babble. He embarks on a misguided and trivial experiment, and comes up with negative results: everything in Berlin has changed, so repetition is impossible. But the Berlin experiment is hardly appropriate as a test of a quasi-metaphysical proposal. If his abandonment of dialectics was whimsical, so also may be his abandonment of repetition. To throw it aside makes good theater. Whatever Constantine's commitment to it, we know that repetition survives vividly in *Fear and Trembling* and the "Job Discourse."

Is Repetition an Achievement?

The zig-zag course of *Repetition*'s opening narrative raises two large questions. *Is repetition something humans can achieve by work or effort?* And, second, *is repetition the master-element in a metaphysical theory – or, instead, an anti-metaphysical device?* Let me consider the first, reserving the question of metaphysics and anti-metaphysics for later.

Constantine decides that repetition is impossible, but perhaps it's impossible only when sought. Seeking repetition may be like shoving on a door that opens only inward, or pushing on one that someone else must unlatch. If Job or Abraham provide our pattern for a successful repetition, their success is surely not the outcome of a specific effort to *get* repetition. Job does not labor furiously to repossess his world; it can only be given at the moment striving abates. Abraham does not labor to retrieve his son. He can only be ready to receive him.

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 *Repetition*, p. 170.

Sometimes value lost is reacquired precisely when we stop trying to regain it, when we attain a stance of receptivity, willingness, rather than the stance of striving-to-achieve. At its highest, Kierkegaard tells us, repetition gives up self-sufficiency.[28] Realizing that the outcome of our search for roots or love or world is not under our control, and so can't be an object of striving, may itself be a necessary condition of openness toward emerging roots or love or world, as they appear. Giving up on repetition as an explicit task can be preparation for welcoming repetition as world-bestowal.

The Letters

Let's return to the young man who suffers unrequited love. The second part of *Repetition* contains a collection of letters written to Constantine from this nameless youth who seeks his counsel. This story of unrequited love is the book's third line in the triangulation of "repetition." There is the lab experiment, where a trip to Berlin is an attempt to confirm repetition experientially; there is the metaphysical or anti-metaphysical task of weighing repetition against its rivals, recollection, and mediation; and now there is an existential challenge. Can the young man sustain a hope for repetition in the face of despair? However, *Repetition* does not complete this third angle of approach. If we want a figure who actually *meets* repetition's existential challenge, who undergoes the ebb and flow of a higher ethico-religious repetition, we must turn to Job or Abraham: neither Constantine nor his companion will do.[29]

Johannes de silentio describes a lad who resigns his love and all hope for worldly happiness, but as a "knight of infinite resignation," steadfastly cherishes her eternal image.[30] To be a "knight of faith," he would have to sustain a hope of repetition, of her return, even as he acknowledges her loss. But this, we are told, is a "movement" the lad cannot perform. *Repetition*'s young man is neither a knight of faith nor a knight of resignation, though his stance is a charming mimic of faith's knight. He craves a return of his beloved, which shows that his relationship to repetition is deeper than Constantine's idle curiosity. Like Job, to whom he woefully appeals as a companion in suffering, he hopes his world, his love, will be returned. But he is not prepared, morally or religiously, for the sort of repetition granted to Job or Abraham.

Consider the young friend's cry for help. He calls out to Job for comfort.[31] But the lyrical invocation of a Biblical figure seems contrived and sentimental. *Repetition*'s young man values the effect the Biblical allusion creates, and the importance cast on *him* through this grandiose association. Imitating Job, he "awaits his thunderstorm," a storm he hopes will restore his world.[32] But is it really credible that he suffers as

28 *Pap*. IV, A 169; Supplement, p. 326.

29 See, for example, *Pap.* IV, A 178; Supplement, 336, where Constantine's Berlin journey is characterized as a farce.

30 *FT*, pp. 41-6. See also *FTP*, pp. 70-75.

31 *FT*, p. 23; *FTP*, p. 56.

32 *Repetition*, p. 214.

Job does, or that appealing to Job might help, or that a world-restoring Whirlwind might appear again, in particular to *him*?

There are other grounds for suspicion of these calls for help. There's a hint that Constantius has *staged* this existential crisis – that the young man does not exist apart from Constantius' literary contrivance. He boasts to have "brought the poet into existence,"[33] and it's not beneath Constantine's power of invention to produce letters (apparently from a young man) as part of a purely narrative exercise. Constantine avers that his friend is now a "poet whose soul has taken on a religious resonance."[34] Should we take this characterization at face value? Unless we trust Constantine fully, the burden is on *us* to find a religious sheen in his voice – as opposed, say, to a shallow sentimental one. *He's* not qualified to be a recipient of "repetition in the pregnant sense."[35] Theatricality seems more basic to him than a deep responsiveness. He lacks the moral-religious seriousness of a Job or Abraham.

Constantine avers that the youth may be "born to himself" as a poet.[36] And it's true he can experience momentary aesthetic bliss. But he's not prepared for the repetitions of self-choice that Judge Wilhelm counsels, let alone a more strenuously religious repetition. As Constantine frankly puts it, "the delights of conception" are to be valued over "the pains of childbirth."[37] Being entertained by seductive ideas is preferred to the labor of bringing oneself to birth, or to the further steps of resigning the world, or preparing for repetition – what Johannes de silentio calls faith's second movement.[38]

Theory and Anti-Theory

We can step back from the narrative to test the abstract characterizations of this "new category." Kierkegaard was pleased that his idea of repetition could be expressed in simple Danish.[39] It travels almost anonymously without philosophical pretensions, the linguistic equivalent of *Fear and Trembling*'s unassuming shopkeeper knight of faith.[40] Yet it's connected with a host of impressive metaphysical concepts (freedom, consciousness, *kinesis*, and others). Constantine characterizes repetition as the *interest* of metaphysics, as if it were theory's crowning goal. But he also says that repetition will bring metaphysics to grief. It might be the metaphysical capstone

33 *Repetition*, p. 228.

34 Ibid.

35 *Pap*. IV, B 111; Supplement, p. 294. Also, see note 12, above.

36 *Repetition*, p. 221.

37 *Repetition*, 141. Constantine is here quoting Lessing with approval.

38 See my *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991, Chapter 6.

39 *Repetition*, p. 149. *Gjentagelse* can mean "taking again" or "retake," as well as "repetition" or "a repeat."

40 Johannes de silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, introduces a knight of faith so ordinary that he might be mistaken for a shopkeeper. See *FT*, p. 39; *FTP*, p. 68.

of a new metaphysics of becoming and also a tool to counter the metaphysics of recollection and mediation.

Let's grant Kierkegaard (and Constantine) an intermediate "critical" Kantian position. We'll assume that the field of metaphysical concepts including repetition is intended seriously, but also that the theory we pursue is explicitly self-critical, metaphysics in battle with its own limits. Thus it gives less than positive doctrine but more than Constantine's bluff, bluster, and deflationary feints.[41] We enter metaphysics largely to define its limits.[42] Kant is the critic of "pure" metaphysical reason – the sort that might hope to ground theories of mediation or recollection. And the thrust of Kierkegaard's category of repetition itself has a quasi-Kantian structure. Alastair Hannay puts the matter this way:

> It is as though the structuring of the world of experience were to be seen in a Kantian way as taking shape in the form of inner intuition, and the psycho-temporal pair of recollection and repetition give you two ways of understanding the temporal constitution in consciousness of the only kind of reality that can save you from boredom and nihilism. But there is a sharp opposition to Kant, too, for in order to achieve that kind of reality your relation to a transcendent God plays an essential part. There is no way of "returning" to the universal [a shared reality that matters] within the limits of reason alone.[43]

Our initial, premoral and prereligious attunement, on Kierkegaard's view, is only an aesthetic immediacy, bound to end in "boredom and nihilism." With the world-conferral of repetition, we are granted a "second immediacy" through which things and persons matter.

The Critical-Metaphysical Package

In a page from Kierkegaard's *Journals*, written just after the text's publication, we find his scattered thoughts from *Repetition* gathered in a single compact passage. The intent is precisely to address a reader needing assistance in deciphering the

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41 Constantine claims he has "given up theory": *Repetition*, p. 216. Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 82, concludes his discussion of *Repetition* with the claim that there is "no Kierkegaardian doctrine of repetition." That Constantine Constantius makes a bewildering variety of claims about repetition is indisputable. However, it does not follow that there is no pattern to the discussion of "repetition" other than a perverse intention to undermine all pattern to the concept. Whether or not a stable *doctrine* emerges, clearly much can be – and is – said about repetition that is illuminating and instructive. A dialectical concept may be subversive of doctrine without being self-subversive.

42 I discuss connections between Kant's critical project and Kierkegaard's lyrical-dialectical productions in *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Routledge, 1996, Chapter 1. On the Kant-Kierkegaard connection more generally, see Ronald M. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.

43 Alastair Hannay, "The 'Impossibilities' of Repetition," unpublished manuscript, 1995, final paragraph. The interpolation is mine.

metaphysical import of "repetition."[44] This passage is part of an unpublished (and undelivered) letter, and nests repetition concisely.

> [we should know] . . . that repetition is a task for freedom, that it signifies freedom itself, consciousness raised to the second power, that it is the *interest* of metaphysics and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief, the watchword in every ethical view, the *conditio sine qua non* for every issue of dogmatics, that true repetition is eternity, that repetition . . . will come to mean atonement.[45]

Let's consider these abbreviated claims. How is repetition a task for freedom?

Approaching from the side of becoming a self, a task for freedom is a task for self, a task set on increasing the openness of a self toward the possibility of repetition. Being closed off from existential possibilities is to be cast into aesthetic indifference and despair.

> . . . get me possibility, get me possibility, the only thing that can save me is possibility! A possibility and the despairer breathes again, he revives; for without possibility it is as though a person cannot draw a breath.[46]

Sickness Unto Death defines the self as freedom.[47] And as we've seen from Job and Abraham, you can't possess repetition by making plans and taking steps. Nevertheless, there's a *task* involved in remaining open – amidst devastating loss – to the possibility of repetition.[48]

Here we can contrast repetition as a *task* with repetition as a *reception* and a *gift*. A musician *takes* a repeat, but neither Job nor Abraham *take back* the world. The task of repetition is closer to readying oneself for attentive *hearing*, the "reception," of that repeat by an awakened audience. But for an audience, the repeat is *given*. Of course, sometimes we're performers and sometimes auditors in the music of creation and self-development, yet as one moves towards the religious or wondrous, the balance shifts, as Kierkegaard has it. One becomes less the actor than the alert receptor. Here the job of freedom is sustaining receptivity. A non-despairing self is ready both to resign the world (as target of one's interventions) and get it back again

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44 In discussing repetition, John D. Caputo equates metaphysics quite narrowly with *stasis*. On this basis, he believes that repetition, which concerns flux, motion, or personal becoming, must undermine all metaphysics. But Hegel's mediation, Aristotle's *kenesis*, and Spinoza's *conatus* are familiar metaphysical concepts that grapple with "motion." Caputo's construal of metaphysics is unnecessarily narrow. See John D. Caputo, "Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Foundering of Metaphysics," in Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, pp. 201-24.

45 Supplement, p. 324.

46 *SUD*, trans. Hannay, p. 69. *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 38-9. I thank Steve Webb for reminding me of this passage.

47 *SUD*, trans. Hannay, p. 59; *SUD*, trans. Hongs p. 29.

48 See my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Chapter 8.

(as gift).[49] The world one gets is in part a function of the self one is: a tempered, alert and open self gets a different world than will a self shut down. Self and world are reciprocally articulate; each articulates the other.

Repetition can be approached from the side of a ready self, and also from the side of the *transcendental task* and *gift* apparent in the bestowal of a world to Job, an Isaac to Abraham, or a beloved to a lover. Both Johannes de silentio and Anti-Climacus figure God as "the fact" that all things are possible – God *is* possibility. And the "task" of possibility, as we might say (if God has tasks) is *increase*, giving *birth*, opening *ever-new* possibilities – which devolve on us "at the border of the wondrous."[50] A world and self are revived *in toto* – as in the wonder of Job's Whirlwind encounter, or Abraham's getting Isaac back. A non-despairing self depends on the resources of repetition to sustain its freedom; and the freedom of a self is expressed in terms of its receptivity to the bestowal of such resources.[51]

A second thread in this quasi-metaphysical package is that repetition is "consciousness raised to the second power."[52] Consciousness can turn on itself. We can have worries, and worries about our worries – and *that's* worth worrying about! For any given datum of consciousness, we are free to reflect on it, free to take up a stance toward it. This dual capacity, to reflect and to "take up," might be called the core of human freedom.

Though I'm bound in any number of respects, I'm also free to reflect on this fact from various perspectives (some strongly evaluative, some relatively indifferent), and also to take up one of those perspectives as one to be mine. Those who move beyond unreflective response to the given or beyond a sophisticated reflective indifference will have a capacity to absorb and respond to their worlds with the intensity of second-order reflection, second-order care, or as Kierkegaard has it, "consciousness raised to the second power."[53] Constantine calls repetition a modern view in contrast to an "ethnical" view.[54] In an "ethnical," tribal, or traditionalist view, self-identity is secured by successful assimilation into prevailing cultural currents. In contrast, readying to *receive* repetition requires that we step back from these unreflectively absorbed common currents, that we assume a stance of higher-order consciousness, which another angle on the idea that "repetition is a task for freedom."

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49 In *Fear and Trembling* the knight of faith will have a dancer's leap, a movement made over and over, every moment. *FT*, p. 40f.; *FTP*, p. 70.

50 For God, "all things are possible." *FT*, p. 46; *FTP*, p. 75. Anti-Climacus will claim, in *Sickness unto Death*, that God is that all things are possible, as well. The concept of the divine appearing "at the borders of the wondrous" is discussed below.

51 The connections between freedom and stages of repetition are spelled out in detail in *Pap*. IV, B 117; Supplement, p. 301f.

52 *Repetition*, p. 229; Supplement, p. 274f.

53 *Repetition*, p. 149. See Harry Frankfurt on "second-order" desire and care in *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; also Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, Chapter 1, pp. 15-44.

54 *Repetition*, p. 149. The concept resembles Hegel's *Sittlichkeit.* See Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment," p. 231.

We find next in the package that "repetition is the *interest* of metaphysics."[55] What could this mean? Metaphysics might be whatever scheme confers meaning on the largest range of things. Metaphysics has an interest in a schematic concept like repetition that promises a global slant on things. We seek wholeness and completion (as well as difference) in the largest scheme of things as a matter of individual initiative laden with subjective passion.[56] Seeking repetition can be construed as a quasi-metaphysical quest. Yet Constantine also goes on to claim that repetition is what brings metaphysics to grief.

Repetition brings mediation, recollection, and old-style, pre-critical metaphysics to grief. Perhaps repetition gives us a glimpse of a "total" view of things that nevertheless is not intended as a piece of "dogmatic" metaphysics, a metaphysical truth we can possess. It's a glimpse of something we can never hope to fully grasp. Kant suggests all our metaphysical endeavors both attract us and founder in this way – endeavors "that [we] can never abandon and yet [are] unable to carry to completion."[57] And there are specific, existential reasons why "repetition" will defy satisfactory intellectual closure.

Presumably we are seekers, not as some abstract general mind but as singular, interested *individuals*. Yet if full-blown metaphysics is a perfectly general theory of the meaning of things, geared to satisfy any and all interested parties, then it will not provide a *special* purchase for the needs of anyone in *particular* – I need words addressed to me in my *particularity*, my subjectivity. Thus its being an all-purpose *structure* frustrates the existential nature of a metaphysical quest as *my* quest. We seek to get out of the world to get a better view of it; but then we find we're not part of the world we've escaped, we're to be found nowhere in particular, and hence nowhere, period. Constantine's friend turns to Job, not to metaphysics, for comfort in his pain. Metaphysics comes to grief, cannot give *me* meaning, if it remains bound to a universality that excludes my particularity, and to an objectivity that excludes my passions.[58]

And why should repetition be, as Kierkegaard avers, "the watchword (or password) in every ethical view"? Why does "every ethical view" *need* a password – the sort of sign sentries exchange in the dark?[59] From the standpoint of *Fear and Trembling*, ethics as a conventional code of requirements and prohibitions is

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55 *Repetition*, p. 149.

56 In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard points out that reflection is not a disinterested pursuit but a passionate or "subjective" one – intending a contrast with Kant, who characterizes the aesthetic stance as "disinterested." See *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 18n. But Kierkegaard has oversimplified the question. In fact, Kant does not neglect the factor of "interest." In *The Critique of Judgment* his phrase for the aesthetic stance is "disinterested *interest*."

57 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: St Martin's Press, 1965, p. 295 [A 235-36; B 294-5]. See note 56, above.

58 See Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, and my discussion in *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Chapter 7.

59 *Repetition*, p. 149. In personal correspondence, Alastair Hannay has suggested "password" or "countersign" (as between sentries) as an alternative to the Hongs' "watchword." See the 1936 entry in Hannay, *Papers*, p. 52, I, A 202, where Kierkegaard reports that

insufficient. We need transit from this limited ethics to a deeper view, yet the escape is best made under dark, and a password will be needed. The city thrives on having an aesthetic playground or civic propriety name the primary options for life. Repetition is the word for secret passage required when the failure of bourgeois ethics becomes inescapably apparent.

An ethics of Judge Wilhelm's variety founders on its own requirements. It requires a responsibility for self and others that outstrips what moral agents can deliver on their own. As the burden of moral suffering caused by awareness of this inability inevitably grows, ethics will reach an impasse. It would be a shameful capitulation to relieve the accumulated moral debt by slackening moral demands. And relief through forgiveness is also outside the provenance of ethics. The forgiveness we need cannot be *required* of any friend or acquaintance or moral judge; hence ethics, insofar as it names *requirements*, cannot secure it for us.[60]

In Kierkegaard's view, if forgiveness arrives it must come from a non-ethical source. Repetition becomes *atonement*, as he says, or forgiveness, a gift of world-renewal in which our moral tasks can be resumed. Repetition is the "password" to the non-moral removal of otherwise intolerable moral burdens. Our watch is relieved.

In addition, repetition is the *sine qua non* of all dogmatics (forgiveness of sin cannot be other than a matter of faith).[61] As the "dogma" of forgiveness, repetition grants relief from otherwise unbearable moral pain.

Next is the enigmatic claim that "eternity is the true repetition."[62] Perhaps the idea is that the source of world-bestowal hovers "outside time," arching over those worldly, temporal things on which it bestows meaning, sense, and worth. True repetition is the appearance of eternity in time – not the ebb and flow of the seasons, the rivers, the generations.[63] One gets the world, the finite and familiar, back again, but now under the aegis of infinite value, of limitless importance – of eternity.

As we have seen, "repetition will come to mean atonement." But in the letter to "My dear Reader" this claim is interrupted by a long parenthetical remark that I excised in my original quotation. Here is the passage with parentheses restored:

> . . . repetition (by being pursued so far that it vanishes for psychology as transcendent, as a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, which commences when a person has come to the border of the wondrous) will come to mean atonement.[64]

Let's work through this parenthesis.

(ix.) Repetition can be an object of psychological reflection or it can assume a status far too grand or uncanny for any "objective science." We might think of the sublime or uncanny as precisely what escapes a disciplined objective method.

Grundtvig imagines the rich needing the Apostolic Creed as a "password" or "countersign" to get into heaven.

60 Even to permit forgiveness as a general virtue may be problematic ethically, for there may be faults so vicious that forgiving them would itself be ethically mistaken.

61 See my *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp. 120-23.

62 *Repetition*, p. 221.

63 Again, see Crites, "The Blissful Security of the Moment."

64 *Pap.* IV, B 120; Supplement, p. 324.

If, like Abraham, we both desire to obey God in his demand for Isaac and equally desire that Isaac be restored, the subject begins to defy "ordinary psychology" and perhaps "vanishes for psychology" (though psychiatry might step in). It's hard to give an intelligible account of how two incompatible beliefs can be held with equal fervor, how one could believe a contradiction. And from the standpoint of someone awaiting repetition, no predictive law of psychology can make sense of the world-bestowals of repetition. That a Whirlwind should restore Job's world is precisely what would not be predicted by psychology. If Isaac is returned, that event also transcends anything psychology might predict. Witnessing the return of Isaac, or the return of Job's world, we stand in awe, beyond the urge – or *capacity* – to offer explanation. So both the religious desire for Isaac's return (or for the return of Job's world), and also the religious fulfillment of those desires, will be "movement[s] by virtue [or on the strength] of the absurd."[65] Both the desire for, and the fulfillment of, repetition defy psychology. Job and Abraham receive repetition at "the border of the wondrous," or "the marvelous" – at the threshold of the sublime.[66]

Several of the young man's letters show his attempts to make his own affliction like Job's. He knows the story by heart and repeats it every night. As Kierkegaard sees it, Job exemplifies a "boundary situation."[67] He works at "the border of the marvelous" because *any* bestowal in his straits will seem wondrous, given his deprivation, bleak prospects and nearness to despair. The bestowal is wondrous because he's not granted just any ordinary world, but one filled with magnificence and power, the wonder of the heavens, the stars, the sea and all its creatures – things the same yet born anew. And finally, he's at "the border of the marvelous" because this world-conferral or repetition bypasses his ethical demands (his demands for justice go unanswered) *without thereby defeating him*: as his world is renewed, so is he – ethical concerns begin from a new, post-Whirlwind baseline, as it were.[68]

Repetition is characterized in this short passage as a movement "by virtue of the absurd."[69] Isaac was in his father's care, was lost, then is restored. This second grant is itself a repetition of his initial marvelous delivery to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Repetition signals the wondrous conferral of Isaac, against all worldly expectation, and independently of Abraham's efforts to directly *achieve* his end. He does not set out to get Isaac back, but to sacrifice him. Isaac's return marks a religious

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65 Hannay's version of this term of art from *Fear and Trembling* is "on the strength of the absurd," while the Hongs offer "by virtue of the absurd."

66 *Repetition*, p. 185. The paradoxical blend of pleasure and pain, of dread and attraction in encounter with the wondrous or sublime is discussed in the context of Kant's *Third Critique* in J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, especially Chapter 1. See also Chapter Ten.

67 See my "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse."

68 As the young man puts it, Job "avoids all cunning ethical evasions and wily devices." *Repetition*, p. 214. That is, he knows that his suffering is ethically undeserved, and will not give in to the "wily devices" his "friends" advance for twisting his suffering into punishment that is justly deserved. He receives, as we could say, his next and better self.

69 See *Pap*. IV, B 118; Supplement, p. 321: "repetition is . . . transcendent, religious, a movement by virtue of the absurd."

repetition "on the strength of the absurd," not a psychologically comprehensible outcome of Abraham's *work* for repetition. And ultimately, repetition is linked with Christian doctrine in which saving value is first wondrously embodied, lost or stripped away, and finally faithfully expected to return: not on the strength of a rational prediction, and not on the basis of a metaphysical axiom known to be true, but on the strength of faith that baffles reason. Hence, once more, repetition becomes a *sine qua non* of dogmatics.

These last parenthetical remarks from the passage to "My dear Reader" reinforce the view that faith occurs on the other side of theory, where "the wondrous" marks the edge of viable metaphysics or moral psychology. Whether as a task for freedom, as consciousness raised to the second power, or as a password for ethics, repetition gives us a cluster of navigational points in a theoretical or metaphysical field; simultaneously, Constantine (and Kierkegaard) chart the limits of this field, catching the spots where metaphysics comes to grief.

Once More: Is Repetition Possible?

In keeping with our theme, we conclude by starting over, reviewing the pivots on which repetition turns. We pitch these lessons mid-way between Constantine's dense and abbreviated para-metaphysical feints and parries,and the enigmatic self-deconstructing indirections of his novella.

I can seek repetition, and even ready myself for it. The preparation would include the task of undoing my preparation for heroic or explosive *action* and readying myself for an active, albeit non-assertive *listening*, as I might still myself awaiting music. The gaining of repetition, however, is not a self-initiated project, but an other-initiated grant. You can't reanimate experience just by willing it to happen, or taking steps. And conceptual maneuvers can't infuse the soul just by exercising dialectical finesse – defeating opponents, writing up plausible alternatives. There's no guarantee that even the best advice or coaching will relieve a person's existential crisis. Nevertheless experience, meaning, or value can be uncannily restored. If we take our cue from Job or Abraham, repetition is possible: a world can be restored, an Isaac returned. But it is not their power or purpose that wins repetition. They gain it while their hearts are set on something else. Job asks *why* his world has been taken; he demands *reasons*; he doesn't try to wrest it back from God. Abraham sets out to give Isaac up, not to wrest him back. Both are beneficiaries of repetition, but neither makes the attainment of repetition his explicit project. Just as a resignation or despair of the search for some sorts of worldly satisfaction may be a necessary condition for their subsequent attainment, so getting the world back may require, first, that we give up all attempts to get it back. So conceived as a human task or as an outcome anticipated on the basis of reasonable expectations, repetition is *impossible*. Its essence is the shock of knowing its impossibility, resigning its possibility – as a strategic goal.

A second lesson: repetition is not to be confused with Platonic recollection, according to which the self would become "true, good, and beautiful" through contemplation or recollection of enduring forms through which it would also gain eternity. Among the attractions of this view are Christian overtones of a soul's

ascent toward the good and "eternal life." Nevertheless, Kierkegaard holds that "recollection" is a pagan view. On his Christian account, meaning or value is not in the "past-eternity" of finished knowledge – as if we were looking for a mislaid set of keys that will be where we left them, once we remember where that is. It's to be found or received from a "future eternity," through the faith that the future will *provide* welcome keys, return what had been lost. Repetition returns what was lost on new and unexpected terms. A renewed self or world streams forth as new day's light.

Third, repetition answers a need for global value, for a world renewed.[70] Insofar as one confronts the repetition of "merely natural" cycles, one falls short of true repetition, which renews meaning and value.[71] Here is a lament from *Fear and Trembling*:

> . . . if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim . . . – how empty and devoid of comfort would life be![72]

But Kierkegaardian repetition is not mere natural flux. For the knight of faith, the cycles of loss and attainment are not just fixed in nature or poetically repeated in speech, but are lived through, celebrated in the concrete tenor of a life, embraced by a single receptive soul. To see through natural or aesthetic recurrences, to know in one's bones, as Abraham does, the giving up and getting back that is faith, is to acknowledge transcendental world-bestowal. To hold a faith that value will surely dawn, that there are worlds to be conferred, is to hold out for full-fledged repetition.

Finally, we have the contrast between doctrine or theory and lived experience. For Kierkegaard, human fulfillment does not rest on a comprehensive grasp of intellectual contrasts, say between objectivity and subjectivity, or between recollection and repetition, or between pagan and Christian lives. Nor is it sufficient to ardently endorse the (putatively) superior term in each of these contrasts. Fulfillment rests on receiving repetition. This is not grasping a theory, nor even grasping it in utmost passion. It is having a concrete encounter appropriate to one's specific need. Abraham gets Isaac back – he needn't care about Johannes de silentio's account of "double movements." Job gets back his world transformed – he needn't care about a philosopher's "problem of evil." What is "repeated," restored, is a world infused with objects of sustaining value, an enigmatic, value-saturated world whose power, allure, and potential for support far exceeds whatever muffled thoughts or passing

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70 Repetition as transcendental bestowal, and its relation to sectors of imagination and bending of the will, are discussed in my "Kierkegaard's Job Discourse."

71 See Kierkegaard's letter to Heiberg, Supplement, p. 306.

72 *FTP*, p. 49; *FT*, p. 15. Also, see my discussion in *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, pp. 32f. The contrast between Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and Kierkegaard's repetition is developed in Giles Deleuze, *Repetition and Differance*, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. For Nietzsche, the test is whether one can face the possibility that the past will be repeated. For Kierkegaard, the test is whether one can face the possibility that a world now lost will be restored.

theory might arise about the ground or source of that world bequeathed. Too much theory is a threat. Gemma Corradi Fuimara puts the danger this way:

> . . . at the very moment in which we "arm" ourselves with a cognitive model we are, paradoxically, justified in losing interest in the object. We no longer consider it as enigmatic since it is our turn to speak . . . It is almost as though a dense cloud of theory, interpretation, and explanation formed around the object, blunting *its* prospective eloquence.[73]

Horizons, worlds, and things embraced therein can be lost or put at risk – as we find in Job's case. Thus the stage is set for their restoration being wondrous. Repetition becomes enablement, allowing life whatever significance it may have, despite our failure to ground that significance in terms of some explicit all-inclusive theory.[74] Kierkegaard brings us back to sustaining values that are concrete, particular, and pre-theoretical. He portrays the importance of repetition for life while batting away our attempts to box up an all-purpose theory of the "mechanism," or "structure," or "metaphysics" of repetition that we presume will allow us to acquire and manipulate meaning and value at will. He revives alertness to an unmasterable particular radiance of things and action, to the subtle textures of reception and situation and of understanding. What otherwise would be mere noise or senselessness can then crystallize in a habitable world in a grant of life.

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73 Gemma Corradi Fuimara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 106-7.

74 World-conferral establishes what Charles Taylor calls "horizons of significance," background frames that set parameters of meaning and value independent of our desire or choice, that let our desires or choices *be* meaningful because they are thereby addressed to issues *already* significant. Choice and desire operate *within* a frame that already differentiates between options that can carry a given weight of meaning and other options that cannot. Frames that determine ethical options and salience, for example, set a scale of significance incommensurable with aesthetic options, differently framed – say, those one confronts at a hairdresser's. In the normal course of things, matters of hairstyle cannot fall under the same horizon of significance as ethics, and my will cannot alter this fact. See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, and *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, Chapters 2 and 3.

PART THREE
Plenitude, Prayer, and an Ethical Sublime

Reverse Faust:
I take the bargain of supernatural ignorance.

– Stanley Cavell, *The Claim to Reason*

That undiscover'd country
from whose bourn no traveler returns.

– *Hamlet*, III, i

I have said nothing – I have
simply acted by existing
infinitely myself.

– *Papers*, 1847

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CHAPTER TEN

Postscript and Other Ethics: Intimations of Our Next Self

Under the pretext of objectivity,
the aim has been to
sacrifice individualities altogether.
– Papers, 1847

My topic here is some aspects of Kierkegaard's interpretation of ethics. It's often assumed that Kierkegaard has only one account, the account of ethical existence discussed by Judge William (or Wilhelm) in *Either/Or II*, an account that is presumably suspended by the time Kierkegaard publishes *Fear and Trembling*. But things are not that simple. *Either/Or*, rich as it is, is but a single foray into the varied terrain of the ethical. One could even say there is a view of the ethical embedded in each of the dozen or so major texts of the Kierkegaardian authorship. The *Discourses* might provide an approach that stressed a number of the cardinal and theological virtues – hope, say, or patience. *Repetition* would contrast with the view in the *Discourses*, and *The Concept of Angst* might have a slightly contrasting view of ethics, and so on through the authorship.

From the widest perspective, we might seem to have a welter of views, the very opposite of a *systematic* ethics, and, given the horrific tale of Abraham and Isaac, perhaps the destruction of ethics per se. Of course, by now we know that this would be a very strained reading of *Fear and Trembling*. It seems much more likely that Kierkegaard's little "dialectical lyric" shows something about the limits of taking ethics to be securely rooted in social routines. After all, the question raised in the second half of *Fear and Trembling* is not the destruction but the "suspension" of ethics. We might say it explores how an ethics of normal life can be shockingly disrupted, and then congeal back into ordinariness, but with the person undergoing that shock radically tempered.

Perhaps ethics is not a single thing, but a Proteus, something changing its appearance in ways strange and unexpected, then settling back into the predictable rhythms of a stormless sea. I explore this possibility later on under the heading of an ethics of change or becoming, an ethics that has us underway and under revision, becoming what we've heard Stanley Cavell call our "next self." An ethics in which we might be immersed in the moment can be wondrously, awfully disrupted. This leads me to speak of an ethics of becoming as also an ethics of the sublime. But let me start some distance from that finish with a book that's often overlooked in surveys of what Kierkegaard might have in store for us as "ethics." I start with a view embedded in the *Concluding Unscientific* (or Unscholarly) *Postscript*.

My aim is not to give anything that could be called a definitive reading of "the ethical" in Kierkegaard. I explore two strands of his sense of the ethical, one strand weaving through Johannes Climacus' slightly technical rubric of "subjectivity" and embedded in *Postscript*, and the other weaving through the authorship as a whole. I cautiously put this second strand under the twin banners "the ethical sublime" and "moral perfectionism."

A Theater for Ethics

In his recent biography, Alastair Hannay characterizes *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as "an itinerary for personality."[1] Kierkegaard himself says of *Postscript* that "*what is new is that . . . here we have personality.*"[2] Personality is a moral status that one works to attain. This is also true of subjectivity. Each demarcates an ideal that calls on me to respond in a way that truly recognizes what I am and can be. In this way, subjectivity and personality are *moral* concepts or ideals.

Moral Personality

In its classical sense, as we'd know from Socrates, moral philosophy addresses the question how one should live. Persons are answerable to norms, or visions, or ideals, and to be the sort of creatures we praise or blame, fear or fall in love with, and often just wonder what to make of. We inherit pictures of what life is, or should or could be, and respond to these with admiration or disdain. As we've seen in the case of Kierkegaard's early struggle for an ideal or vocation he could believe in – Faust or Socrates, for instance – we find ourselves taking a stance toward values, toward the virtues and vices enclosed in portraits of a life's unfolding.[3] One might defiantly *reject* the thought that value makes demands that we must answer. But a move toward nihilism or despair is itself a normative response – a response that evaluates value, refuses its call on us. In this light, the ethics of Judge Wilhelm in *Either/Or II*, or the tangle of ethics that Johannes de silentio describes in *Fear and Trembling*, are contrasting *moral* orientations. Even what Kierkegaard calls a religious stance (apparently – but only apparently – in contrast with an ethical one) is, in this broad classical sense, a moral stance. A Christian stance toward life and worth, toward passion and engagement, becomes a stance toward love and courage, humility and patience, toward value bequeathed and toward what might be called a source or donor of that value.

By taking *Postscript*-subjectivity as a moral or ethical ideal, I depart from the popular view that Kierkegaardian subjectivity must be either a Cartesian state of

1 Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 300.

2 Ibid., p. 436.

3 Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Pessimism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, helpfully distinguishes prohibitions, virtues, and ways of life as three strands of "the moral." This broad view of "the moral" gives a better access to "Kierkegaard's ethics" than trying to make it out to be either Hegelian or Kantian, say, or some mix.

consciousness or a special place from which one can know. We have instead an ideal, a moral status to interpret, aspire to, revise, and realize. *Postscript*'s theme of subjectivity maps out and embodies the drama of *realizing personality*.

There are three angles from which we can view this theatrical unfolding. We can watch personality become realized in the text as it models aspects of what human life can be. Various characters or figures – Socrates, the subjective thinker, the assistant professor, the declaiming parson – personify moral themes. This allows us to resonate with ideas in the way we resonate with figures on a stage. Then, we can step back to extract from this itinerary for personality a rough set of conditions that constitute the possibility and fulfillment of personality. This is to entertain and assess a set of moral-philosophical claims *about* personality. Finally, we can take to heart the fact that the unfoldings of *Postscript* subjectivity or personality make existential demands on those of us who read it. The text shows us aspects of personality, and in that showing, urges or invites or calls us to *embrace* some, *consider* others as live-possibilities, and decisively *disown* others. Let's trace the subtle process that puts personality on stage.

Seeing Titles as Tableaux

Is *Postscript* a treatise? It has an impressive table of contents, a seven-page spread of chapters, parts, divisions, appendices, and numerous subdivisions. But Climacus is a humorist.[4] The look of sober organization might be tongue-in-cheek.

Consider the title. Alastair Hannay's fresh translation sparkles and makes us think: *Concluding Unscholarly Addendum to Philosophical Crumbs*.[5] Here we have scaffolding for a theatrical tableau. "*Unscholarly Addendum*" is quite close to "inconsequential afterthoughts." "*Crumbs*" sounds inconsequential, too. Are these *mere* crumbs? Picture them as remains falling from the table of a royal impresario, who with dramatic flourish turns them into fodder for an acquisitive mind. But why should scholars read unscholarly afterthoughts, or dive after crumbs? Well, crumbs might be magically transformed into something nourishing. Alternatively, we might read the title retrospectively: what we *took* to be the nourishing promise of a treatise turns out to be *mere crumbs*.

If we expect a treatise, the subtitle, *A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation – An Existential Contribution*, is equally unsettling. Mimicry, or miming, suggests theater or the stage, a place where feeling, emotion or mood (that is, pathos, passion) can unfold contrapuntally (that is, dialectically). Johannes Climacus might be the

4 *Postscript*'s Book One, in English translations, is perhaps 50 pages; the remaining pages, numbering over 500, constitute Book Two. This makes the initial division crazily lopsided. Part One of Book Two presents a somewhat continuous argument through 100-odd pages. Part Two, with various appendices, numbers roughly 440 pages, creating another lopsided division.

5 See Hannay, *Biography*, p. 315, I owe a great debt to Hannay's work, especially his appreciation of *Postscript* as the completion of a Faust project, the importance of the *Journal* revelation that in *Postscript*, "we have personality," the neglected issue of "how long" to stay with the text, and the ghostliness of Kierkegaard's presence. See also Hannay's translation of *Postscript*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

impresario directing this "mimic-pathetic-dialectic compilation" staged as comedy, tragedy, satire, or farce. Yet tomes are seldom organized to engage or activate an emerging play of emotion, mood, or feeling. (Tomes can disappoint or excite, but that's a different matter – their explicit aim is not to lead us through phases of excitement or disappointment, but rather to instill fact or theory, for example.)

This complex "compilation" that Kierkegaard calls a *Postscript* has a third-level subtitle – a "sub-subtitle," as it were. *Postscript* is a compilation – a gathering of dramatic scripts and scenarios, we might say, but also, and at a contrasting level of significance, *An Existential Contribution.* We can picture the contribution of an actor delivering up the living flesh and blood and spirit of the character assigned. That would be an existential sacrifice of one's talent, skill, and dedication toward the fulfillment of a scripted personality. And in addition to this contribution of an on-stage actor, there's the matter of the theater's contributing an existential change in my *own* moral outlook and comportment. Taking in the full impact of a theatrical performance of another's personality, as onlookers, even as deeply affected spectators, we might come to the "existential" realization that we are *more* than onlookers, that there are demands and calls and invitations there that draw out our *own* personality. Reading (or watching) *Postscript*'s drama is no substitute for attentively living out the detail of our *own* seeds of personality or character.

Postscript in hand, we initially expected the outlines of a philosophical position. Now the text begins to take on the aspect of a drama of personality. As Kierkegaard puts it, ". . . what is new is that . . . here [in *Postscript*] we have [not a doctrine or a thesis but] personality."[6]

Mixing Genres

"Here we have *personality*" – Or "*character*," or even "*a master virtue, subjectivity.*"[7] How can *Postscript* deliver these? Well, we have characters with names like "the subjective thinker," "the docent or assistant prof," "the speculative philosopher." Climacus pens out a part for himself, too: smoking his cigar in Deer Park, or watching an old man grieve in Assistens Cemetery, or enjoying the role of raconteur.[8]

Getting Climacus in view (as personality) is like getting Hamlet or Faust in view. Hannay suggests that *Postscript* can be seen as a continuation of the "Faust project" that preoccupied Kierkegaard in his student days. Martensen published *his*

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6 Ibid., p. 300.

7 See Robert C. Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Roberts takes Climacus' talk of "subjective thinking" as a way of reviving the classical interest in virtue and traits of character. From the angle that Roberts presents, the maxim "truth is subjectivity" can be heard as shorthand for the following (my words): "In matters of ethical truth, what is essential is character and virtue – that is, subjectivity." Advocacy of subjective thinking is advocacy of practical wisdom (as opposed to objective thinking, which is advocacy of theoretical and observational knowledge).

8 He tells the story of a crazy fellow obsessed with proving his sanity by telling the truth and nothing but the truth, over and over: "The world is round." *CUP*, p. 195.

recasting first. Dejected, Kierkegaard set his own aside. In the old version, Faust sells his soul to get knowledge. In the revived *Postscript* version, Faust-Climacus sells off objective knowledge (of things eternal) to *get* a soul – to realize personality or subjectivity.[9]

This retooled Faust explores what Climacus calls the "existential categories" of thought, passion, imagination, personal relation, and suffering.[10] A Faustian drama would depict the living personality that emerges in the artful interplay of these categories. The premise is that "science," or disciplinary academic research, or listening to the crowd or media, can't tell me how thought, passion, relationship, or imagination are to get embedded in *my* life.[11]

To gain his soul, Climacus-Faust refuses to pledge an uncontested allegiance to the pursuit of propositional, doctrinal or detached knowledge. Climacus knows that formal philosophy can be quixotic, tilting at windmills. Chasing Climacus through *Postscript* can be like chasing Quixote across the arid Spanish plain.

Postscript paragraphs spin out as prologues and soliloquies, as episodes of comic relief and jokes, as moments of grief and recognition, as parodies and parables; as meditations on melancholy, truth, and joy. And since what we have is an *itinerary* for personality, there is something like a series of rest-stops or platforms, each of which functions as a stage for the particular personality-realizations that are appropriate to that stage.

Six Strands of Subjectivity

You might think at this point that I've neglected what's central to *Postscript*. It can be read quite easily, you might say, as a treatise on subjective truth or subjectivity.[12] Well, if a drama is in progress, its characters *do* have something to say. *What* Climacus says is every bit as important as the *how* of his delivery, or as his enactment of a dramatic role.

The *how*, as I've said, is performed on relatively stable platforms: the stage of scholarly distraction, the ethical subjectivity of Socrates, the subjectivity of guilt consciousness and of Christian consciousness. These rest-stops or platforms give us a sense of *what* a *Postscript* drama might have to say about Socrates or scholars. But rather than start down that familiar road, exploring stages or episodes on life's

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9 Hannay, *Biography*, p. 66.

10 *CUP*, p. 357; see also Chapter Eleven.

11 Cavell suggests that Faust's bargain to gain "transcendental knowledge" could be reversed. To "reverse Faust" would be to "take the bargain of supernatural ignorance." Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*: *Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 263.

12 Hannay gives a sample of the causes that claim to be *Postscript* heirs: the efforts of Husserl, Heidegger, or Sartre; the inauguration of a postmodern theology; an improved Fichtean theory of subjectivity; an existential Christian Apologetics; a critique of the ideology and practices of "mass society"; a piece of straightforward philosophy – say, a defense of subjectivity as conscience, commitment, or whatever; or perhaps a witty parody or exposé of the genre of speculative philosophy; or a mock-argument so cleverly constructed that only professional philosophers will get the joke. See Hannay, *Biography*, p. 297.

way, I want to look at what I called above the conditions for there being personality or subjectivity.

Unraveling these constituent strands of personality reinforces our negative case: *Postscript* subjectivity is *not* whim, eccentricity, or arbitrary taste; *not* a philosopher's pure consciousness (the sort of world-deprived autonomous subject that Heidegger and others seek to undermine); and *not* primarily an epistemological concept. Rather than exploring the ingredients of worthy *knowing*, subjectivity asks us to respond to, explore, and take up features of worthy *living*. Neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus had any taste for tables of dos and don'ts, but for simplicity I want to list the invitations or demands of subjectivity in order to convey part of *Postscript*'s positive case. Kierkegaard no doubt would disown any tidiness and pretension to completeness. Proceeding anyway, as the subjectivity, receptor, and responder that I am, I'm invited to:

- *live out, as I can, a complex relational pattern of deep personal concern.* Life should be more than an arena for trivial distractions, one-up-manship, opinion-mongering, playing out the puffery of market success.
- *inhabit, or at least aspire to inhabit, the ethico-religious stage of existence or character.* Life should transcend the shallow "objective" stage of scholarship, aesthetic voyeurism, or passionless urban life of "see and be seen."[13]
- *exercise when and where I can the sort of practical moral agency that makes responsibility paramount.* Life should not be reduced to world-observing or theoretical knowing.[14]
- *show an engaged adverbial "how," a style in which I go about my tasks.* Persons are not just an objective "what" – what one has learned or acquired or what status one has attained; action has a manner or style.
- *exercise my capacity for self-avowal: take up something as my own project or commitment.* Persons are gifted with more than a capacity for self-observation, or for free action; they can, and should, take things to heart as their own.
- *embrace, as in many cases I already do, that sort of trust (or faith) and imagination that's crucial in cultivating a balanced tension of aesthetic, ethical, and dialectical traits or strengths or virtues (Bildung).*[15] Persons can counter pulls toward fragmentation and disintegration, bringing themselves up, letting themselves unfold.

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13 Note that this division between objective and subjective stages of existence replaces the more touted threefold division of stages.

14 See Roberts, "Existence, Emotion and Virtue.".

15 Kierkegaard's advance on the Romantics, in his conception of personality, is to shift the act of synthesis, *Bildung*, from human imagination or a human-initiated poetic or practical project, to a faith-based project dependent on other than human powers. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 23. Note that some time after Judge Wilhelm, the "building-up" of personality becomes a *downsizing* of self-importance – which might seem to be the reverse of *Bildung*. But "cultivation" remains in *a paring and weeding* that allows the primitivity or passion of personality to flower.

This rather wooden breakdown of subjectivity amounts to six features of the broad demand or invitation that the ideal of subjectivity delivers – the ethical or moral ideal that subjectivity is. Working to meet these conditions or demands is traveling the road to personality.

The Weave of *Postscript* Passages

Now I want to proceed to explore the natural interweaving of these strands of character or personality through several central *Postscript* passages. I'll do this under four headings: Lessing's view of subjectivity; subjectivity and objective knowledge; subjectivity as acknowledgment and answerability; and subjectivity as aesthetic/ethical/dialectical capacity.

Lessing and Subjectivity

Did Lessing make a deathbed confession, as Jacobi averred, that he was a "Spinozist" – not a proper Christian? Strictly speaking, by his own standards, anything Lessing confessed ought to be irrelevant to Jacobi and to the German cultured elite poised to listen in. Far from being a scandal or a *cause célèbre*, Lessing's convictions shouldn't make another's conviction swing one way or another. So his reported confession is – or ought to be – superfluous, a curiosity, a diversion from one's own ethical or religious vocation. Note that, at the close of *Postscript*, Climacus characterizes his massive effort as "superfluous." With regard to my existential work, it's a long diversion. And Kierkegaard revokes any authority to specify its meaning.

A general disquisition on religion is futile existentially. We long for an all-purpose road map that any number of reasonable people could follow in their drive to invest themselves religiously. But that's impossible. A road map is useless if I have no idea *where I am* or *where I want to go*, or *what my interests are*. Road maps can't give me my immediate existential orientation. They can't tell me where in particular I am or what I have to invest. They can't tell me which direction I face or where I want to go. Without such primal, passionate orientation, I can't know which map to consult, or which sector of it to peruse.

Religious texts may have maps, but they also have to activate or bring me into tactile or visceral contact with where I am and where I want to go. Personal, intimate address can accomplish this; art or drama or poetry can. But general disquisitions by their nature just bypass that level of address. What it means to *me* to be the person I am, to know where I stand and the direction I face is something forged, as Stephen Dedaelus has it, in the smithy of my soul.[16] For it to happen, things like concern, responsibility, and the capacity to claim a path as mine must be in place, be part of my receptivity.

16 See James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, final sentence, many editions.

Objective Gaps and Subjectivity

Leaving Lessing behind, Climacus turns to subjectivity and objectivity as ways to truth. Misguided critics often assume that Kierkegaardian subjectivity must be a kind of last-ditch epistemological recourse, a bulwark, a fallback position to call on when cognitive answers are missing. But *Postscript* subjectivity is a task, a *moral* goal to realize, and so the truth it seeks to realize is *not* a truth of objectivity. It's an ideal or path one could take up as one's own. And it's clear that there's nothing in this commitment to a moral goal or sense of ethical vocation that banishes or *undervalues* objectivity.

Subjectivity becomes an apt and even urgent orientation, a master strength or virtue, because our needs as persons far exceed our cognitive needs. *We need much more in life than cognitive success*. God has perfect cognitive success, as Climacus might say, yet even He exhibits thorough subjectivity.

If a scientist or scholar or news reporter is subjective or biased in producing her results, this marks an epistemological vice. But humans can – and must – exhibit a *different* sort of subjectivity, a virtue not of knowing but of *living*, a matter not of facts but of *becoming*, not of consciousness alone, but of *agency*, *inwardness*, (or *earnestness*), and "*personality*." The several strands of personality tallied above – self-avowal, responsibility, style, agency, concern – amount to an anatomy of the truths, the strengths, the underlying constituents of subjectivity and personality.

Epistemology considers standards, like coherence and respect for fact, to which candidates for objective truth must respond as they compete for the honorific title "Knowledge."[17] Candidates for subjective truth, on the other hand – say, a heart-felt vow or confession – aspire to embody and express one's very self or soul, to deliver one's fullest personhood or personality.

Objectivity demands that, as participants in a community of knowers, we respond to a collective demand to clean up the common *store of fact or theory*, and bring our personal beliefs or opinions as close to the thriving common norms as possible. Subjectivity, on the other hand, demands that on my own *I* clean up my individual *standing* as a *person*, a task that can be undertaken apart from concern for common norms, and, when conceived religiously, be undertaken under the eye of the unknown, of the wholly other, or of a watchful God.

A Biblical God exhibits subjective truth (alongside His purported perfect objective knowledge) insofar as He exhibits truth in agency and receptivity, in concern and love, at the least; in devotion, in character and responsiveness, in responsibility and

17 Climacus endorses a kind of "knowledge" that escapes the confines of classical epistemological attention. What he calls "essential knowledge" is a kind of Socratic self-knowledge. In Chapters Two and Three we noted that such self-knowledge is not standard knowledge – certainly nothing based in observation or inference. As I will reiterate in the next section, to know oneself or to have "essential knowledge" seems less a matter of fulfilling a cognitive pursuit than a matter of "knowing where one stands" – that is, being able to avow one's commitments responsibly. "Essential knowledge," or "self-knowledge" we could say, is a *state of character* rather than a state of cognition or knowing. It is the capacity to enter a *deposition or pledge* on one's own behalf regarding one's present state, one's past responsibilities, and one's commitment to a particular future one owns.

concern; in strength and imagination. Persons (divine or otherwise), have capacities to know, but also to love and appreciate, to judge and create, and to exhibit personality as self-avowal: "I am what I am"; "I will be what I will be." And they have Iago's perverse, even Sartrean, variation on this capacity, the dangerous capacity to say "I am *not* what I am".[18] And they have Hamlet's prescient version of *Gelassenheit*, "*Let be!*"[19]

A life restricted to objective uptakes of the world would be less than human. A human agent might value objectivity, but that means aiming to *cultivate* an objectivity, means striving to *realize* it, which means being reasonably – and passionately – subjective. Of necessity, objectivity will be pursued within the confines of a life that will contain much else – dressing, eating, collaborating with colleagues, and catching the bus – tasks each of which requires agency, some responsibility, some concern for things other than cognitive success. Without the goods of personality, a complete, ardent objectivist can't be ardent – about objectivity or anything else. She lacks a personal attunement or orientation to and in the world. She lacks a personality or character she can *call* – and that will *be* – her own.[20]

Acknowledgment and Answerability

What spins by me objectively as just another path that anyone in general might find attractive is transformed as subjectivity engages and I recognize or acknowledge *this* path or response *as mine* and vow I'll *answer* for it.

Descartes located the essence of a human self in its capacity to *know* itself transparently. Kant pictured an "*I think*" as the elusive self-relation that makes a thinking thing a self. Climacus could take the essential self-relation to be not an "*I know*," or "*I think*" but an "*I acknowledge . . . as mine*" or "*I will answer for . . . .*" This brings out what's essential in making an "existential contribution."[21] Existential *acknowledgment* and *answerability* must accompany any part of what I feel or do or think insofar as I am operating, then and there, as a *moral* self.

As well as developing third-person disquisitions *about* existential contributions, Climacus *makes* one. We find this in his attestations of vocation, as in his famous Deer Park resolution: "I decided it was my task to make things difficult"; we find it as he plays out his project in attacks on the complacent "speculative thinker."

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18 *Othello*, I, i.

19 *Hamlet*, V, ii.

20 This moment of taking responsibility-for-self is characterized by Paul Ricoeur as a kind of "backward promise" insofar as it's a testimony (a promise or vow) that one *has* been thus and so, as well as that one will be thus and so. See Anne-Christine Habbard, "Time and Testimony: The Ethical in Fear and Trembling," in N. Cappelorn, H. Deiser, and J. Stewart, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook, 2002*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002.

21 In availing myself of the image of "taking up" something as one's own, I mean not the selection of something from a static array, as if to "own" something were to lift it from the shelf, pay for it, and take it home. To make a way of being one's own is closer to taking up a theme in the improvising of a jazz ensemble, taking up with the theme or motif, and in renewing it in one's own life, showing that the rendition was not just a replication but taking up with it – and letting it *take me* up – in a personally transformative way as one's own.

And we find it as Climacus passes the baton back to Kierkegaard, who then avows responsibility – for what he *has* done – and disavows what he *hasn't*. All this occurs in his "final deposition" (or "First and Last Explanation").[22]

This demand for acknowledgment and answerability is a Socratic, ethical demand. It's a demand for an accounting of one's life. This does not mean producing a factual account, a comprehensive CV, a list of accomplishments or love affairs, for instance (though we're endlessly fascinated by such accounts). One enters a deposition, standing up for the way things seem and are, as before a judge, a court, or an ideal that calls one *to* account. Socrates in the *Apology* is the model here. His bearing and talk before his accusers make a promise that he is, and will be, truthful in delivering his account, and make a promise that he'll stand by it. Socratic acknowledgment and answerability are caught in what is best seen as his pledge and deposition at his trial, a witness or testimony before his city. What we call self-knowledge (as we saw above in Chapter Four) is not self-observation or self-theorizing but the visceral capacity to know where one stands and to pledge its truth – pledge that one is truthful in relaying where one stands, and truthful (or sincere) in promising to stay there, in that moral posture or orientation. Self-knowledge, then, is related to the strands of subjectivity we called concern, responsibility, and self-avowal. I acknowledge and answer for what *has been* my life, and so avow, under assessment and on balance, what my life *now is*; and so in that light, avow, once more, with mustered conviction, what it *will be*.

One bears witness because one is concerned for the course of one's life, and concerned to account for it to others (or to Another). One finds oneself responsible even if one cannot name or focus the source of whatever it is that puts one's life in question. We find ourselves as humans under the burden of an answerability broader and deeper than the demands of civic or legal accountability. Aesthetic, personal and religious standards measure the accomplishments and failings of one's life, the quality of engagement with friends, with art, with civic institutions, with family, with natural or urban landscapes, with faith (or lack thereof). Finding ourselves answerable is finding ourselves under the eye of measures or ideals that claim us, that place us in a space that calls for reasons and actions that elaborate and answer. Living under the gaze of such ideals is the welcome/unwelcome burden of having a life I can call my own.

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Theater is a natural frame for *Postscript*. The on-stage performance makes the manner of its delivery intimate, as it should be. *What*, exactly, is it that's delivered with such a non-textbook-like intimate intensity? Perhaps a set of invitations or demands that collectively animate an ideal of subjectivity, a point of aspiration that gets worked in and out of several central *Postscript* passages. Now let me return to Climacus as

22 He's responsible for the pseudonyms, but disavows responsibility for being anything more than a "prompter." *CUP*, p. 625.

an impresario, a critic of the text he runs by us, a kibitzer and satirist who twirls and dances and slyly winks but who's doing more than clowning.

Aesthetic/Ethical/Dialectical Capacities

Here is a powerful characterization of "the subjective thinker" that brings together aspects of subjectivity that we've canvassed above. It fills out the idea of subjectivity as artistic style in the unfolding of personality, as *Bildung*, as the readiness to live with trust (or faith) and imagination in cultivating a balanced tension of aesthetic, ethical, and dialectical traits or strengths or virtues.

> The subjective thinker's form . . . is his style . . . His form must first and last be related to existence, and in this regard he must have at his disposal the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, and the religious.[23]

> The subjective thinker is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist. To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough for his life to have aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to control it.[24]

Is Climacus a subjective thinker? If we suspect that the answer is "Yes," then Climacus is related "first and last to existence," and "has at his disposal the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, and the religious."

Hannay notes that *Kierkegaard*'s ghost hovers spookily around the pseudonymous texts.[25] Surely we find *Climacus* hovering ghostlike over *Postscript*, constantly appearing, interrupting things, refusing to let the argument or exposition speak for itself. Here are telltale signs of an author playing ghostly hide-and-seek:

1. Pseudonymity calls attention to the eccentric writer deploying the pseudonym.
2. Extravagant titles call attention to the show-off inventing them.
3. An extravagant (and lopsided) table of contents exposes an author flaunting his capacity to perform outrageously.
4. Mammoth footnotes call attention to an author unable to bring a stop to his interventions, even after the galleys are returned from the printer.
5. An interlude is brashly inserted that discusses a shadow author's previously published works (and we know the shadow is just another shape Kierkegaard assumes); Climacus shows us *what* the shadow author has done, what *his* thoughts *about* it are; and we see him put himself there before us *doing* the show and tell.
6. Stylistic virtuosity is a sort of self-advertising; the writer showcases an extravagant variety of styles: dialectical exercises, comic skits, parables,

23 *CUP*, p. 357.

24 *CUP*, p. 351. (Swenson's translation has ". . . dialectical enough to interpenetrate it with thought.") *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Walter Lowrie and David L. Swenson, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941, p. 314.

25 Hannay, *Biography*, p. 152.

melodramatic scenes set in graveyards and public parks.
7. In a finale to the book, the author makes a double run on stage to comment on the play we've seen and to bracket, or retract, its "message."
8. Unnumbered final pages draw attention to the composer behind the scenes (or, more accurately, to the composer who can't *stay* discreetly out of view); he's shown plainly in the act of adding an extra unpaginated *postscript* to the preceding appendix-addendum to the *Postscript*.

Climacus is like a comic who doesn't just *tell* the funny story. He constantly reminds you that *he's* telling it, and that nothing would be happening if *he* weren't happening. He writes *about* the topics of acknowledgment and answerability, and shows us his *own* striving to acknowledge and answer for his words – hovering over them poised to assimilate them, to alter or reject them, and hence to make an existential contribution that will be his deposition.

He painstakingly makes and remakes a place for himself within his exposition. If he only wrote *about* personality's contribution, then we could pass off what he says as just another piece of interesting theory, a thesis. But in striving to make his words his own, striving to make the liveliness of the words become in fact the liveliness of his life-as-author, Climacus shows – as theater shows – the existential contribution itself.

Now in the context of the *Postscript*, the "existential contribution" is laying out the inner contours of a polyphonic personality, a theater of many roles and characters, orchestrated by Climacus, who in turn is orchestrated by Kierkegaard. If we shift focus to the larger horizons of the authorship, we discover an aesthetic-ethical-religious theater of vast scope and depth. We've explored these written worlds from several angles, often from the angle of a single text or passage in a text. But we can shift our interest from the ethics of *Either/Or*, or of "The Job Discourse" or of *Fear and Trembling* to a wider panorama.

Becoming My Next Self

If we let this panorama stretch from Kierkegaard's earliest journal entries to his deathbed confession of a Socratic vocation, then we might hazard some remarks on the way that the full authorship serves a midwife's role in bringing out who we readers are and might become. And we can also hazard moving toward the rich moral ideals (broadly speaking) that the works inscribe. This would be to move toward the presence, as I sense it, of what I've called an ethical sublime. It's not an ethics of fixed norms or virtues but of becoming – it's an ethics that interrupts and facilitates a human stance.

Becoming and the Ethical Sublime

An ethics of becoming, as I'll understand it, is an ethics of the self responsively striving to become its ever-elusive self. That passionate motion (or motion of passion) toward what one is and can be, is seen as an instance of what Kant called the

dynamic sublime, and what George Pattison calls Kierkegaard's anxious sublime, a sense I expand and call an ethical sublime.[26] I promised a wide angle for this exploration of becoming and of the sublime, taken as aspects of ethics. We can start at one end of the panorama of the authorship, with Kierkegaard's earliest unpublished writings as we find them in his *Journals and Papers*.

Kafka asked his friends to burn his papers at his death, but Kierkegaard clearly wanted his saved. Of course, Kafka's papers included nearly completed books, and many finished stories and parables, while Kierkegaard's contain less of this stature. Nevertheless, the posthumous papers (specifically, the "A segments") can be taken as a stretched-out Kierkegaardian text roughly on a par with his many published books. These papers are roughly similar to Wittgenstein's unpublished notes and notebooks, which have now been stitched into a dozen "books," starting with *Investigations*.

George Pattison shows us how the discourse literature in Kierkegaard's right hand sustains and supports the pseudonymous literature in his left.[27] If the *Papers* are a third text-bundle, then we might have a three-way conversation. From a panoramic view, the tag "Kierkegaard" becomes a textual trinity, a relational self, a self even grounded in another. We can bring out the moral or ethical aspect of this trifurcated presence by highlighting its ethical rationale. This three-way conversation among clustered writing voices imparts freedom insofar as Kierkegaard disperses his authorial authority, renouncing a single center from which to speak. Our freedom as interpreters is increased as we're invited to join a decentralized conversational field. Its relational structure supplements other devices – some hidden, some not so hidden – that release his writing to our care: among them, pseudonymity, revocation, irony, and humor.

An ethics of becoming traces the gradual accumulation and momentum of a self becoming a self. For a Kierkegaard looking back on the vast bulk of his writing, that will mean, in part, finding himself as he became himself through his speaking and listening in the conversational field constituted by his journals, his signed works, his pseudonyms. An ethics of becoming also acknowledges its dependences on and freedom with endless *other* others – intimate friends, and also an ever-widening community of interlocutors. Thinking about the moral basis for pseudonymity brings this out.

Passing Freedom

Consider the ethical impulse behind pseudonymity. In the case of *Postscript*, Kierkegaard passes sovereignty to Climacus, which frees *him* from continuing oversight of the writing. It belongs to someone else, to Climacus. In *Postscript*, we also have a "revocation," which is another distancing device that frees the writing from the writer. "Everything is . . . revoked," Climacus writes in the final pages. He says, in effect, after finishing the book, "The text is now yours! I step aside! I revoke

26 George Pattison, "Kierkegaard and the Sublime,"in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser, eds, *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook, 1998*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998.

27 George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, Theology*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

my presence!" Once Climacus is done with *Postscript*, he gets out of our business. The text stands on its own, as we, its readers, do.[28]

Authority is also transferred from writer to reader by the device of according the papers and journals an important posthumous standing roughly equal to the published material. If there were an authoritative textual locus, a citadel from which "the true voice of Kierkegaard" spoke, then sovereignty in matters of interpretation would be mobilized around it. But neither *Postscript* nor *Either/Or* is more sovereign than the posthumous *Point of View* and neither is more or less sovereign than the *Discourses.* Deploying multiple points of view disperses interpretative privilege, installing a primitive equality among speakers or texts. Each makes a case on merit alone. There is no ghostly seat backstage from which Kierkegaard can whisper answers.

Of course, this freedom-transfer can be refused. We might yield to the hapless search for a yet-to-be-uncovered code for interpreting the texts. But this refusal would be a moral failing: a failure to claim our own voice, a refusal to occupy the space the writer abdicates, a refusal to inherit the interpretative powers he has exercised and then passed on. It would be a refusal to be *dealt with* by the texts, to be *read* by them.

Polemics as Consolidation

There can be an abdication and dispersal of authority only if Kierkegaard has something to relinquish and pass on – say, his authority as a writer. But how did he become a writer with the courage and resource to write texts that set themselves and readers free? How has he gathered the resources of reception and response that a self must own, or have on loan? Texts set us free when their author has a plenitude of passion and character – has spiritual mettle to spare.

To revisit a theme from Chapter One, early in the *Journals* Kierkegaard yearns for "an idea for which I could live and die." This would be a consolidating center, feeding energy back to him in the struggle to become the self he would be. This animating center would fill a void, answer an excessive dispersal or plain *absence* of concern or significance. To be energized by a life-conferring image would lift him from being *only* a self-to-be. Finding his idea gives him spirit to write, spirit to spare, spirit to pass on – gives him *himself.*

Life-options beckon in the early passages of the *Journals*. For a millisecond he considers a lawyer's life, and even a police inspector's – then quickly switches to life *outside* the law.[29] Could he be a Master Thief or Martyr? One answers to holy writ yet suffers under common law; the other *taunts* all law. Socrates has an "idea for which he will live and die" that pits the city against him.[30] Faust is *skeptical* of established order. The prankster Eulenspiegel *shakes up* the solemn social center. The Wandering Jew defies social place by being

28 See Chapter Twelve on revocation.

29 For his musing on being a lawyer, see Hannay, *Papers*, 1 August, 35, I, A 75. On his being a police inspector, see 47 VIII, 1, A 171.

30 Socrates acknowledges the duty of respect for the laws that have been as parents to him; yet clearly he takes his contemporaries, at the moment of his trial, to be in disrespect of these "parental" laws.

forever *out* of place. Kierkegaard dwells with these guiding images, each offering him an authoritative sense of self even as they undo conventional authority.

To take Master Thief, Eulenspiegel, Socrates, Martyr or Faust, as life-options would place Kierkegaard at the edge. This befits someone who senses marginality as his fate. How could one with his uncommon intellectual and artistic gifts and troubled family *not* come to sense that exceptionality, marginality, would be his fate? Becoming intentionally oppositional can seem to be a natural "adjustment" for one already, by dint of circumstance, in an outsider's position. It could be a natural tactic to fend off a threatening despair.

Scripting Socratic or Faustian scenarios animates a life-not-yet. As Kierkegaard puts it in a note from August 1835, "[B]y taking on another's role I could acquire a sort of surrogate for my own life." What begins as a surrogate relationship might in time become entrenched. He could *become* a Faust or Socrates. But, for the present, he won't *live into* these scenarios. He continues almost casually ". . . in this exchanging of externals, [I] find some sort of diversion." But this is itself a diverting pose. At this point in his life, trying on roles can't be *just* amusement. He seeks an exemplar as a necessary someone with *something worthy to pursue*. In time, becoming a polemical writer takes on increasing plausibility. Writing in opposition could yield self-consolidation. As an acute observer who writes up the varied human scene, he can both explore and remain marginal to the "surrogate" lives he scripts. At first, he escapes living into them by taking them only experimentally.

From this point of view, his mid-life rejection by church officials or by *The Corsair* insures him a focus around which to mobilize energies that otherwise will flag. But if he has no higher aim than polemic itself – "Give me any view, I'll oppose it!" – then the emerging writer will depend for his spirit on the whim of others. Without their mettling resistance, he loses heft. Could he become contrarian – *with a cause*? Is he drawn by the prospect of an abiding polemic? Does he find a beckoning prospect of getting ever clearer about an abiding cause that's *worthwhile*? [31]

At a relatively early stage in his prodigious career, it seems that the idea for which he can live and die is polemics – *with a mission*. The *sort* of mission remains up for grabs. Will his inventive pen flow in the service of religion, aesthetics, or ethics – humor or irony? Will it be in the service of God Incarnate or God above God? In the service of Faust, Socrates, or martyrdom? We wait to see.

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31 Truth is " anything but the result of a unified effort . . . to become an individual, to continue as an individual, is the way to the truth." From *Journals and Papers*, quoted in Rick Furtak, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, p. 175. You need a unifying idea, I take it, but the task is not just a straight-line assault on the objective. Unities will be provisional, multiple, and have a tendency to fall apart. Their centers will not hold. Kierkegaard spins our worlds apart at the seams, shatters complacency and systems, scattering bits and fragments that are sometimes complementary but often mutually repelling. Nevertheless, there's a tenuous unity in play, the unity-disunity of the ethical sublime.

Ethics to Spare

Ethics in Kierkegaard has a number of local variations. Judge Wilhelm is one. Another is *Postscript* Socrates, and yet another resonates in the suspended codes of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard appreciates the classical view that has ethics address the question how we might live worthily. This view spreads ethics wide enough that it can respond broadly to religious life and be incorporated loosely in it (though at times, of course, the ethical will challenge the religious, and the religious will challenge the ethical). In this broad perspective, Kierkegaard neither suspends nor sidelines ethics as his writing enters religious life.[32] Abraham is responsive to prohibitions against theft and murder. In the Moriah case, these aren't determinative because he is also responsive to prohibitions against abandoning God. The rich ideal of *Postscript* Socrates shows that an examined life and a cross-examination of one's city make up an ethical life – a life that is also religious (as we've seen). *Works of Love* has no suspension of the ethical. We no doubt need distinctions among kinds of lives addressed by ethics, and perhaps one sort of ethics gets suspended as another takes hold.

There is blatant ethical deficiency – the absence of ethics – in the womanizing rake or the numb mechanical cog in a commercial machine. But these deficiencies aren't obviously failures to meet Kantian, Hegelian or utilitarian standards. Here, ethical failure is measured by a lack of proper mien and mettle. Such proto-selves lack proper passion. Judge Wilhelm does better, but is still far less than an ethical paragon. His passion is misplaced: he's too concerned with fitting in, with roles. The ethical complacency (no doubt exaggerated) that's attributed to standardly decent husbands, good judges, or competent clerks isn't as bad as base corruption. But something is missing. What's missing is passion for a relevant perfection.

We'd expect Kantian life to be a major step up, which it is. But it, too, falls short. God should be more than just another name for Moral Law. As important, to go no further than to ground actions in a law of reason will neglect more heartfelt sources of a worthy life. A life sparked by compassion or religious devotion finds strength apart from reason. At a higher level of ethical becoming we find near-perfect lives, exemplars. Socrates bucks the tide, on his own, with full earnestness and courage. And pays heavily. Christ does, too. Individually, and joined together in a collaborative identity that Kierkegaard might aspire to attain, they set a heavenly bar, as *Works of Love* does. Perhaps it's *too* high for ordinary mortals.

Can we cut past these options to another spot, somewhat apart yet near enough to still be ethics? Borrowing from Stanley Cavell, we can sketch an expansive reach of spirit, passion, and subjectivity, an expanse he configures as the interplay of self and other that's characteristic of what he calls a moral perfectionism. The key idea, as I hear it, is not that one *aims* for perfection, or has a handle on what perfection *is*, but that one never lets oneself arrive at full moral satisfaction. An idea of incompleteness, of something dim or dark left unattained, of a kind of ever-receding

32 I discuss the so-called teleological suspension of ethics of *Fear and Trembling* in *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991.

call of something more and better than one's present resting place, is behind Cavell's theme of moral perfection. It's the nagging feeling that things are still imperfect, that one is not quite done, or is even still undone, that there's room for moral growth, even as one is at a loss to say (ahead of time) in what precisely that growth will consist. It's characterized by the restlessness of knowing one is incomplete even as one has no explicit notion of what the completeness or perfection is that beckons and so unsettles moral rest.

After having obeyed the rules, played out one's social role, done what "any rational moral agent must," and satisfied minimal requirements of virtue, there's *still* an intimation of a call to better things, to one's next and better self. To be always morally on the move and so without a place to lay one's head is not a defect. Such restlessness, such unfinishedness, becomes sufferable (rather than a saga of futility) as one awakens to the fact (or faith) that one's way is marked not just by incompleteness, but by recurrent dawns, recurrent unexpected awakenings, recurrent realizations of a new and better path, a new and better self, a new and better place, or a relationship or self reborn.[33]

Here, expressed in a painfully telegraphic shorthand, are four central themes in what Cavell calls moral perfectionism, a pattern that I suggest fits large sections of a Kierkegaardian ethics of becoming:

1. *in the crisis integral to a renewing vision,*
2. *we find the self beside itself,*
3. *as it transparently confronts its exemplar,*
4. *whose gift is to guide its sufferings and struggles.*[34]

From this angle, Socrates, or Faust, or Christ become exemplars calling those who hear ever forward in light of their perfections. As fits perfection, they are always one step ahead, and, as befits perfection, we always feel that under their purview, there's always another step to take, another revision to make, another new insight to absorb and take to heart. These exemplars – say, Socrates or Christ – mark an ideal or path to live and die for. And as they animate an ongoing, ever-renewing ethics of becoming, they trigger a sense of what I'll call below the ethical sublime.

Perfectionism – becoming the singular person I am and can be by relating to another – is a moral or ethical theme, but it's rather outside the usual maps of moral or ethical theory. It's not *utilitarian*, out to calculate a means to happiness; not *conventionalist*, out to assume roles proper to one's station; not *Kantian*, out to conform to reason's law; not a version of duty as *divine command*; not *Aristotelian*, out to cultivate virtues apt for human flourishing (though there's worth in courage, say, or truthfulness, or charity). Ethics lived under the purview of such a perfectionism is a style we find in Nietzsche and Emerson as well as in Kierkegaard (not to mention

33 See Cavell's discussion in *Cities of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

34 John Lippitt writes in elaboration of Cavell, and in respect of Kierkegaard, "The primary role of the exemplar . . . is to disclose to one one's 'next,' 'higher' self." *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000, p. 29.

Plato and countless others). It lets ethics become less a matter of attending to the general, abstract form of the good and the right than of passionately suffering and shortening the distance between one's present place and the place one's exemplar illuminates. Fixed guidelines or stable virtues fall aside in a startling encounter with a singular presence who speaks intimately to one's condition.

This perfectionist stance gives no special access to an *objective justification* for a way of life. It does, however, *illuminate* a desirable way of life by *exemplifying* its possibility, by recommending it through evocative portrayal, by holding it up in witness as a life to *prize*. Ethics in many of its instantiations is exclusively the search for virtues or principles or theories that can *justify, vindicate, provide reasons*. Moral perfection has little explicit or novel to say along these lines. Yet it remains a kind of ethics, for in our reflective moral lives we seek a kind of ethical *intelligibility*. We ask how it goes with a friend or with a neighbor. That's an invitation to them to speak casually, or more seriously, as they see fit. We might learn from their response something more than we had guessed about their aims and struggles, their sense of pride or shame. We want to know what makes a stranger tick, what she finds funny or repulsive. This search for intelligibility, for "what gives" in one's own life or another's, has a different tenor than a search for justification before a quasi-public court, or the delivery of moral verdicts ranking others.

Exemplars provide intelligibility to a way of life. They address a particular person, but also invite a wide audience to test their worthiness or bearing: to test their depth and staying power through dialogue, meditation, and continuing exploration. This sort of ethics does not lie easily beside the standard theories of Kant, or Mill, or Aristotle. It invokes the mysteries of receiving oneself; of losing oneself to find oneself; of encountering a call to stand forth; of relating transparently to another always out of reach. Spiritual mettle is tested as one undergoes and undertakes the passions these mysteries sound out. We track the exemplary lives of Socrates or Christ, of Hildegaard or Simone Weil, with an eye to approaching our *own* vocation in the spirit that they approached *theirs.*

Under the eye of Faust or Socrates, Kierkegaard might heed the call to be a writer, follow it with passion. He might let its passion call him further, leaving him undone. He might find himself in spirited polemics in the service of ideals that Faust or Socrates embody.

The Dangerous Edge of Ethics

I've set to one side posted virtues, rules of prohibition, and conventional roles in order to sketch an approach to ethics that lets one become one's own worthy singularity. But ethics of whatever shape plays out within a wider setting at the edge of which one encounters *limit conditions* – death or birth, for instance. And to show my cards, the onset of the sublime can occur elsewhere than in encountering distant stars or raging seas. What's key to the sublime, as I'll understand it, is a felt tension between importance and comprehension, between what defies full representation and simple representation, between inflation as one soaks up the presence of power and deflation as one is drained before that power, between an unfamiliar, strange and haunting mystery that draws one forward and a fear that drives one back. Stars

appeal, but they spin in terrifyingly untraversable and indifferent empty space. Raging seas have all the allure of great lions or massive alpine peaks, yet bespeak the possibility of devouring us. A Joban voice from a whirlwind revives him with the surpassing beauty and power and vastness of the world he now can open to, but that world is also untamable and surely terrifying, too. The crushing beauty of a great soprano's voice can lift and break one's heart in a single bursting phrase. Birth and death can, too.

Death might seem to be a bare if ineluctable fact, like sunlight or nutrition. But raging seas can be just bare fact, too – say, in a satellite report that conveys only swell heights or an aviator's report of wind knots. You might think that death assumes an ethical significance only in the matrix of social life. We bring death into the space of threats, assault, murder. But there's a wider angle, one from which Plato names the philosophical way of life, and hence the ethical life, as a practice of death, or a rehearsal for it, a readying for a final letting go. Just so, Kierkegaard names death as his life's dancing partner. Traveling to the limits of life and comprehension, we find death. There's a dread of death, "*that undiscover'd country from whose bourn* (or boundary) *no traveler returns*."[35] It waits at the dread limits, awaits articulation in tragic visions, in stoic strategies of disengagement, in religious hopes of resurrection or communion with the dead, or perhaps most depressingly, in nihilism, a stance that recoils, holding that death makes nothing matter, ethically or otherwise.

In visions that are tragic, stoic, religious, or even nihilistic, death can saturate our ethics – even as it resists assessment under standard ethical models (Kantian or Aristotelian, for instance).[36] From a middle-range point of view, ethics seems to circulate in the realm of law and justice, integrity and freedom, beneficence and unselfishness. Yet both from an intimate and from a long range point of view, ethics seems also to be a deep, opaque response to the pain and loneliness of death – and (we might say) to the pain and loneliness and even glorious delight of birth, of place, and of other persons.

The enigmas of death and place and other persons haunt the limits of imagination. I may with some confidence imagine the death or birth of distant others, but only failingly, incompletely, problematically, imagine my own, or that of those nearest to me. I sketch the place of others, pinning them down with objective confidence within an institutional, urban, or rural landscape, yet only failingly, uncertainly, imagine where *I* really belong (at least in certain moods, and however easily I reel off an official address). I sense the presence of many others, but often only failingly imagine their rich inner lives. My subjective, affective, imaginative access to these most important existential limits – death, others, birth, place – is both immediate and impossible, bringing me to something near and far, intimate and disturbingly unknown. To walk this enigmatic edge is to brave the edge of the imaginable, to brave a *sublime* encounter. And, of course, these limits cross and imbricate and haunt the enigma of

35 *Hamlet*, III, i.

36 Death is neither a vice nor a virtue, nor a denial of happiness, one could argue, for the one who's dead. We could say that the badness of death leads us to seek happiness while we may, and to prohibit others from dealing me death. But these attempts to find an ethical role for death seem forced and artificial.

who I am and might become – who Kierkegaard is and might become – who a child is and might become.

Shimmering identity

Attempts to frame the raging sea always fail, though the effort seems inescapable and the outcome, in the best of hands, can be marvelously revealing. The open sea has a counterpart in the raging or serene inner sea that we seek failingly to master in our projects of identity. There is a moment – a sublime moment – of awe, power, and impotence as we consider both the immediacy and distance of a Kierkegaard becoming Socrates or Faust, Martyr or Wandering Jew – or a simple writer. In one sense, a search for self turns up nothing, as Hume observed. Yet we can't abandon it. Imagination can turn up alternately a cacophony of empty possibilities (leaving me bereft), or in better times, a cornucopia of just those passional satisfactions that give grounding and impetus to further life. In the worst of moments a dark can obtrude. We become, as Hamlet has it, "a quintessence of dust" that gives no delight.[37] Then the possibility of openness to wonder, enablement, consolidation, or faith painfully absents itself.[38] And even in the best of times, though bathing in what happily appears as continued openness, we may still sense, perhaps only peripherally, that it too will pass, even as requited time or love will pass – even as Hamlet asks, "What's a life, but [time enough] to say 'One'"![39]

Kierkegaard's discussion of anxiety, freedom, and transformative "moments of vision" when life starts out anew can be linked, as George Pattison suggests, to a version of the Kantian sublime.[40] The Kierkegaardian anxious sublime appears as a *horror religiosus* on Mount Moriah, and appears in the shimmering possibilities, dark melancholies, and restlessness of modern Copenhagen or Paris. These settings – of Moriah or the spectacular city – exemplify an ambiguity of place that permits apprehension under the aspect of the sublime, displaying then the edge of ethics. An urban sublime undoes the moment of conventional ethos, unsettling it, putting it at risk, allowing that, at any moment, anything can appear or disappear in the anxious flow and crush of crowds, reflected lights and colors, shifts of scale from alleyway to boulevard, constant noise and chatter, the incongruent abutments of Cathedral, City Hall, Amusement Park, Bank and Seedy Taverns, each clamoring for recognition, declaring the edge of representation and comprehension, the edge of identity and stable ethics. We find a fragile tumult tilting toward a possibility of life – or death.

There's another setting Pattison describes, not identified directly as an instance of sublimity, but, to my ear, one that conjures it. This is not a wild sea- or cityscape, but an inner prospect, an "inscape" of ultimate significance. He describes a brush with

37 *Hamlet*, II, ii, 303.

38 There's an argument from philosophers of art, that the sublime worked in 19th-century poetry and painting to undermine bourgeois ethics, the conventionalism of roles and rules.

39 *Hamlet*, V, ii, 74.

40 Pattison, "Kierkegaard and the Sublime"; also his *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Crisis of European Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chapter 1.

"primal loss of continuity," which in turn describes, as I see it, a primal reckoning with *an anxious ethical sublime*.

> The primal loss of continuity with the life that bore my life and the final loss of self in death mark out boundaries that are reinforced by the repeated experience of the births and deaths of others. Both this retrospective primal loss and prospective final loss are implicated in every important life-decision that I make, because they fundamentally condition my sense of life and my sense of myself as belonging or not belonging to it. It might be morbid to dwell excessively on these limit situations. But to [fail to] look at them entirely would be to undervalue our humanity.[41]

How does this frame *ethics*? If this sense of loss infuses "every important life-decision that I make," then reckoning with it is a moment of the ethical.[42] We might say it's a test for ethics to find the ways that I do and don't belong to a wider expanse of life, as life and its decisions inevitably obtrude. In any case, it's a worthy ethical impulse to accord proper value to our humanity, and provide as luminous an account of it as possible.

An Ethical Sublime

Fear and Trembling evokes the fear one feels at abdicating sovereignty, the depth of loss one undergoes when severed from a child, a foretaste of recuperation in the joyful thought of a child's return. The moment of Isaac's impending loss is all but unimaginable. Johannes tries valiantly, lyrically, dialectically, failingly, falling finally into silence. This impending loss defines a moment of the anxious sublime, and just as certainly attends Abraham's counter-phase of hope for his son's return. It's a commonplace that Moriah breaks up the ethical, the human world. But it's just as true that Moriah shatters the divine. Abraham is about to lose Isaac, and also about to lose the God whose promise seemed unshakable, but whose promise now for all the world seems broken. To make and break Godly promises is a terrible breach of faith; to raise and fell a son is just as terrible.

The weaning of the child beneath Moriah bespeaks anxious separations, the sublime in miniature. Johannes de silentio gives us images and songs insufficient to the purpose. Love, betrayal, trust, hover all about in a powerful unimaginable and unmanageable mix. Father and son, mother and child, paragon of faith and God are caught up in explosive, fragile mutuality. Anxiety, awe, trust and compassion are on alert. As much as any prohibition against murder of the innocent, death and

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41 George Pattison, *"Poor Paris!" Kierkegaard's Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, p. 140.

42 Creation and Apocalypse, dispersion, sites of birth and death, of place and others are at the border of the ethical terrain. Our faltering imagination ushers in a dread and wonder that portends the *ethical sublime*. Thoreau captures this sense of life suffused at birth by the sublime: "Who can contemplate the hour of his birth, or reflect upon the obscurity and darkness from which he then emerged into a still more mysterious existence, without being powerfully impressed with the idea of sublimity?" *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 95.

rebirth haunt this extremity. These tensions test the depths of ethical personality, test capacities for trust and courage in disaster, for poise and resolve in chaos, for willingness to lose oneself in the hope one will be restored.

From the edge, we're given an intimation of what crossing over and out of ethics might be like – though crossing defies imagination. Abraham divests himself of false possessiveness over what he can only pretend to own. As he stands with his most prized "possession," he may also take himself to be as one with Isaac. Then the binding of Isaac is the unbinding of Abraham from any pretense to have mastered whatever value undergirds his life. To sacrifice the son is self-sacrifice, as in the later teaching that he who would find himself must lose himself. *Can we imagine all this?*

The tame image of the nursing mother, a motif repeated four times in the Attunement, fixes the issue at stake as one of separation, of the trauma of weaning. But this manageable, domesticated image is blown sky high by the image of Abraham raising his knife, an impending crisis-death of Abraham and a clear and present death of Isaac. Abraham then gets Isaac and ethics back, and God's promise can seem strangely mended, credible again. *We can't imagine that!* This wild happening on Moriah breaks up a cauldron of the ethical, but also *mends and fills it once again* in an uncanny repetition. These events at the Limit defy adequate figuring, yet cry for yet another impossible attempt. Disruptions answer representations, disunities answer wholeness, unimaginables answer the imagined. Thus, the condition of the sublime.

Unsettled Authorship

We've seen a writer consolidate a vocation from the budding interests of his early wandering. Yet his works serve not only to consolidate, but in their irony, revocations, and pseudonymity, to radically unsettle. As we'll see in the following chapter on revocation, such disruptions can signal a release of freedom to our benefit. And we can see in these crises, displacements, and resolutions "the oscillation between 'awakening' and 'consolidation' in the constitution of the person," (as a recent author puts it).[43] The event – or advent – of the ethical sublime shows in the tensed juxtapositions of disruption and consolidation, dispersion and gifted-freedom, as these converge in a sudden moment's power and intrusion.[44]

In the whirl of testimony, pseudonyms, irony, lyric, anxiety, and strange beauty, we find our being as becoming – just beyond, yet with and in, imagination and its realizations in passions, moods and strengths, or virtues. Who can fail to marvel

43 Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, p. 197.

44 This "moment" is the moment of the glance or *Augenblick*, discussed in Chapter Six. My route to the sublime comes through Pattison's 1998 *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* article, "Kierkegaard and the Sublime," which keys the sublime to anxiety and suggests that a site of the sublime for modernity is the city (not only ocean storms). If the turmoil of the city can be a site of the sublime, then the soul, as an inner city, could be such a site, as well; and the authorship, as a mirror of the tumult of the soul could be a site, too. As one commentator has put it, there's "meta-ethical madness at the heart of personality."

at this writer's deep affinity for such vital moments, his capacity to catch (as far as possible) shifting aspects of a sublime at the far extent of comprehension and expression. Pen in hand, he writes and so scatters such elusive aspects out for others. At the edge of understanding, we find primal loss in birth and death. Yet this venture to the limits, to the ethical sublime, can also leave us open to a humility, cognitive and moral, a humility that companions generosity and compassion, and that awakens us to named and nameless others who people the worlds in which we move and have our being. Awakens us to a creation in which our time is but an instant.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Postscript: Possibilities Imparted: The Artistry of Intimate Connections

Real ethico-religious communication
is as if vanished from the world.
– Papers, 1847

In its inexhaustible artistry, such a form
of communication corresponds to and
renders the existing subject's own
[inexhaustible] relation to the idea.
– Postscript

The essentials for a moral or spiritual life don't wait quietly for us in simple slogans or even in lengthy texts. Kant tried to set out the jurisdictions for art, knowledge, and morality in a map of the prerogatives of each. But the very generality and necessary abstraction of that map meant that it failed to make contact with the hopes and fears and loves of particular individuals negotiating not a general world, but their very local ones. We crave, it seems, the specificity of a particular life that, in its vivid detail, can exemplify one that could be ours. Kierkegaard brings moral knowledge and its art, the lively artistry of the soul, down to earth, letting it speak there in its varied plenitude, in its alluring, halting, terrifying energies.

Having pseudonyms present various viewpoints and embody various stances encourages our free responsiveness across a range of affect. Art-like works address us by appealing to our interpretative sensibilities and nicely make a detour around an essay's arguments or a preacher's imperious or intimidating or quite gentle exhortations. To see how art or ethics, a Socratic or a Christian stance, might animate one's life, he turns to narrative portraiture and evocation. He artistically *displays* the "dialectical lyric" of a Johannes de silentio as he mulls through multiple versions of the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling.* He *sketches out* the "comic-pathetic-dialectic" of a Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*, a figure whose mentor is surely Socrates. In the immediate way a work of art allows us such direct encounter, we get closer to what it would be like to take Abraham or Socrates as exemplars, closer to what a life lived under their lights could be. We learn from vibrant exemplars.

Learning what might be helpful in a life can involve taking in arguments or information or doctrine – a proposition, or a series of them. That's roughly what Kierkegaard means by taking in a "direct communication." One also learns what might be helpful in a life through taking in what exemplars exemplify in the artistry of their lives. They exemplify ever-so-many things other than propositions: generosity

or courage, cunning or playfulness, honesty or outrage, an imaginative freedom or a combative intellect. Exemplars exemplify these vivid aspects of a life directly, and with great force; they strike us dramatically and intimately. Their artistry has transformative impact, enacting an intimate communication, sometimes quieting, sometimes shattering.

Information- versus Affect- or Virtue-transfer

The transfer of an affect or a capacity for freedom, of a virtue or a complex "existential" orientation, is nothing like the transfer of propositional content. Kierkegaard wants to hammer home this fact, but makes a poor decision in picking terms to designate this contrast. It's not confusing to call simple information transfer or delivery of a creed or set of rules an instance of *direct* communication. But when Kierkegaard wants to highlight the transfer of affect, capacity, virtue, or orientation, it only muddies the waters to label this sort of communication an instance of *indirect* communication. True, indirect communication contrasts with information transfer, and communication through propositions. But marking the contrast between propositional and non-propositional communication as a contrast between direct and indirect neglects the fact that non-propositional content can get directly communicated. If I express my rage by screaming "*No!*", then normally you'll take my communication to be as direct as can be. Of course, a communication can have both propositional and non-propositional force. If I say, in a passion, "*Please! Don't go there!*", a propositional content will be conveyed (that's a dangerous place), and a terrified concern, as well (that's a *dangerous* place – *watch out!*).

To be won by Socrates, to fall in love as he asks questions, is to have received a transfer of his allure. He's a master of "indirect communication," drawing us into his net (which is not teaching us the truth of a proposition). Of course, he asks a question that merits a reply in straightforward propositions. He says, "*And what could you mean by that?*" What is non-propositional in his speaking is his quiet yet firm intensity, and an attentiveness that wins us to him directly. What he conveys is twofold – a question, which we can ponder and paraphrase and attempt to answer, and an electric charisma that draws us to him, that makes us want to be in his company. We can identify a charismatic style immediately without being confident that we can describe *what* it is and *how* it works. I may not have the capacity to evoke contours of his attractiveness in a way that makes them vivid to myself or others. I can fail miserably at that task. That's why we sound foolish trying to say just what it is in a person who steals our heart that *allows* the theft. The friends of Socrates know his great importance in their lives, and find his impact inescapable. Yet they stammer incoherently or fall silent (unless they're great poets) as they try, and fail, to give an account of his allure. Is it the look in his eye, the slight hesitancy in his rough speech, a melting in his shoulders as they turn slightly to one side? Is it the sensation that he sees *through* me?

This difficulty unpacking what happens in the transfer of allure is poorly served by saying it's *indirect* communication. Nothing in our commonplace capacity to share a sense of confidence, a mood of terror, a spirit of playfulness, a passion

for truth, a freedom to interpret, a capacity to be more loving – none of these is exactly *indirect*. Yet there *is* something mysterious, and that mystery often has *direct* impact. You communicate your phone number, and, when asked how I got it, I say, "You spoke it clearly, I wrote it down." Socrates communicates his allure – it *wallops* me – and when asked *how*, I stumble: "That turn of phrase . . . *you* know, that gentle wit. . . . His sharp intelligence . . ." Yet the mystery of love remains.

A direct communication – a kind of propositional or information-transfer – is easily paraphrasable. "It's raining in California" might be paraphrased, "If you go to California, you'll discover a downpour." On the other hand, transfer of mood or affect or energy or virtue from me to you, or from Socrates to me, resists paraphrase, because the launch of an affect or mood or virtue in my direction is not the launch of a string of words. Paraphrase is translation from one proposition (or a couple of them) to another proposition (or a couple of them). When we hear Lear's anguished "*No! No! No! No! No!*" the bulk of what's conveyed is a kind of desperate agony and anger. To convey what gets transmitted, I have no propositions to translate into other words. You can't paraphrase a "*No!*".

To catch the drift of Socrates' allure is to attend to a complex configuration of his intelligence, gentle wit, fearlessness, and serenity. These are items of his being, not sentences. In communicating them to us (if he does), he communicates a capacity to sense our own intelligence (or lack of it), or our own serenity (or lack of it). If he's communicated his allure, that fact will show up only haltingly or misleadingly in what I *say* about the matter. It will show up in a change in my way of being, an awakening to what he is and stands for, the transfer not of a sentence or creed or proposition but of *a capacity to be a better version of what I am*. Words I utter will fall short of passing on what I've received. The fit of words to affective, personal, mobile being will always seem rough, ungainly, allusive, indirect. Words *evoke* a state of being (Socrates' state of being, Lear's state of being); they're not a simple description and certainly not a *paraphrase* of it.

Indirect communication doesn't route information or doctrine in a roundabout manner, taking an *indirect* path where a direct one was available, or where no *direct* path was possible. It routes something different, something without propositional force. It conveys the very *being* of an affect or capacity or potential. *That's* the core of what Climacus mislabels "indirection."

If the aim of spiritual or moral communication is ministering to others in their existential need, then such communication will find information- or proposition-transfer (new facts, new doctrines) secondary to the need for change of affect, orientation, virtue, or enablement. Kierkegaard's great insight is that conveying what's decisive in a way of life is not a matter of learning something doctrinal but of finding a life that exemplifies what's best, morally and spiritually and religiously – then letting that exemplar's power enter our lives, to be taken up and expressed in our lives. This "transfer" presupposes more than narrowly cognitive or intellectual skills. It presupposes a capacity to take up experience, take up affect, mood, passion, and their exemplifications in a way of life. An intimate communicative art lights up an exemplary life, its passions, moods, and virtues; it bespeaks an artistry that imparts possibilities that at first appear other to me, and then can become my own.

Engaging Subjectivity Non-discursively

Machines can pick up information on the weather or your phone number. They can communicate "objective-only" data automatically. Such direct communication serves to mark the banal end of an axis where we give and get telephone numbers, and report the "bare facts" of what to say when reciting a creed or making a polite excuse. It concerns knowledge that, as Climacus has it, can be simply "reeled off".[1] At the other end of an axis we'd find non-discursive (or non-propositional) communication, the terrain of the shimmering, the uncertain, the uncanny. And just the delightful smile of a child. Hear Lear cry out: "*No! No! No! No! No!*" We're *moved.* He transmits not a proposition – but *what*? Despair? Rage? Deep refusal? Desperation? Notice that if these words are to be *moving*, he can't just speak in any tone of voice – a monotone, say. He must *cry, cry out* – "*No! No! No!*"

How that cry – that line – arrives, inflected at its apt degree of passion, will make all the difference. *What* comes across is passion. If I rush through or mumble these sounds, I've short-circuited what might have been the most powerful of events. Voiced properly, we have nothing like data for a log:

> "*Tuesday, 12:01 pm. King said 'No' five times.*
> *Bad weather*"

We have excruciating, desperate, raging energy and pain. Hear James Joyce's Molly Bloom cry out: "*Yes! Yes!*" We have exhilarating joy and affirmation transferred to us, but nothing like data from a log.

There's a disproportion between the great energy of affect transmitted in a *cry* and the absence of force in a two-letter "n–o" – or a three-letter "y–e–s" – scattered lifelessly within the column of a dictionary entry. It's a disproportion that leaves us only exasperated if we try to express what that great refusing cry amounts to as *information*. Of course we *can't*! A cry reduced to data is no longer a cry. Everything subjective about Lear at that moment arrives in an anguished "*No!*" Everything subjective about Molly at that moment arrives in an inviting and ecstatic "*Yes!*" No fact or piece of creed or theory, no "objectivity," equals or expresses it. And the passions that rend the heart in those simple sounds rend *my* heart, arrive and open up the felt-possibility of a passion that might just be mine – *is*, for the moment, mine.

Enabling Subjectivity: Pseudonyms

A striking communication of another non-objective, non-propositional sort is found in Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, a tactic that opens our frustration, apprehension, curiosity, or alert interest. By avoiding direct address, does Kierkegaard dismiss us? Dismiss himself? Create a character? Just add an extra flourish to words obviously his own? However we end up interpreting his manner – whether it be coy, exhibitionist, secretive, perverse, provocative, teasing, testing, wicked, deceptive, playful, jesting,

1 *CUP*, p. 75.

experimental, evasive – we're forced to somehow fix it by gathering our imaginative capacities and focusing them on the matter at hand.

Interjection of a pseudonym creates an aperture for freedom, a realization of interpretative existence that sloughs off the automation of direct data transfer. I shuttle options: *Teasing*? *Pedagogic*? *Frivolous*? What's in a *name*, in *this* name? Is this a puzzle with a key?[2] Is a pseudonym in fact a persona, perhaps a counter-voice to Kierkegaard's own? Can pseudonyms "talk" across their differences or is each hermetically sealed from others – and perhaps from me? Like a good metaphor, the interruption of a pseudonym spawns an abundance of thought, feeling and images. I *experience* my mind or soul at sea, thrown in the labyrinth of interpretative freedom, not just told *about* it.

If a transfer of interest, affect, or capability awakens *my* subjectivity, the aperture of subjectivity is also open wide from the side of the *creator* of a pseudonym, from the side of the *transmitter* of this communication, as it were. What Kierkegaard clumsily calls "indirect communication" involves expression *and* reception of affect or capability. Moving to take up the angle of someone caught up in the *expressing*, we can ask: "What does this pseudonym say or do? How will that saying or doing be received by another? How will the distinction between pseudonym and creator hold up?" If proper distance between a pseudonym and its creator is not maintained, the reader will mistake Kierkegaard for an authority on some matter of fact or doctrine to be communicated in direct address – and with all urgency. However, Kierkegaard's task is to awaken *our* subjectivity. Accordingly, he must partially veil or disguise his seriousness, for authorities can intimidate or overpower, as well as inspire and command. And even were he to inspire without intimidation, in yielding to his charisma, our freedom is at risk. Climacus makes this point by bringing out the contrast between Socrates' outwardly unfavorable appearance and his inner beauty.

> Through the repellent effect exerted by the contrast, which on a higher plane was also the role played by his irony, the learner would be compelled to understand that he had essentially to do with himself, and that the inwardness of the truth is not the comradely inwardness with which two bosom friends walk arm in arm, but the separation with which each for himself exists in the truth.[3]

As Socrates must hide to protect his student from too easy a seduction, so Kierkegaard must hide so that his reader may come to "exist in the truth." By having pseudonyms speak, a bit of anxiety and a bit of freedom is conferred.

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2 Codes are intended to be unambiguous once one has the translation key; hence they are direct communications that bypass subjectivity. However, we sometimes talk of "decoding" a poem – that is, working to get the gist of what on the surface is opaque. So in this sense one's initial reaction to a Kierkegaardian pseudonym might be that there was something like a key to work out, even if in the long run one discovered, properly, that to even suppose that there was a strict translation key would be to have started on the wrong foot.

3 *CUP*, p. 222.

Pseudonyms speak from a unique position, in intimate address to a specific other, whose freedom is protected – as it would be in any broadly moral communication.[4] "The secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free."[5] Thus *Climacus* appends to the very end of the *Postscript* a revocation of all he's so far asserted.[6] In the tome's "final explanation" *Kierkegaard* distances himself from the pseudonymous works as a whole, including *Postscript*,[7] thus twice distancing a writer's authority from the printed word. This promotes a reader's freedom to interpret the words free of authorial pressures. "Wherever the subjective is of importance . . . communication is a work of art; it is doubly reflected, and its first form is the subtlety that the subjective individuals must be held devoutly apart from one another and must not coagulate in objectivity."[8] Artistry protects subjective freedom. Kierkegaard's overriding aim is to enable another to *become* ethical or Socratic or Christian. But if he's only thrown a bone to a bored intelligentsia who coagulate in a crowd chanting another slogan, then he'd rather take the whole book back.

Unobtrusive Transfer

Communication of information can go on without putting our inwardness on notice. (An exception, showing how much context plays a part, would be reading from a roll of the war dead. But, in that case, perhaps we're not transferring information but memorializing.) In dry, uneventful cases, content passes from mind to mind without ruffling subjectivity's feathers. But most writers want to *alter* or *awaken* subjectivity, to strike the spiritual quick. For Kierkegaard, irony and pseudonyms awaken, startle, or subvert. Such tactics as awaken subjectivity will exploit tension between outer

4 A Kierkegaardian "theory" of practical reason has interlocutors face each other from a standpoint of respect, each engaging, without manipulating or coercing, the other's subjectivity: see Stephen Mulhall, "Sources of the Self's Senses of Itself: The Making of a Theistic Reading of Modernity," in D.Z. Phillips, ed., *Can Religion be Explained Away*?, London: Methuen, 1996. More generally, see Mulhall's *Inheritance and Originality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; and my *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology, from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

5 *CUP*, p. 74.

6 *CUP*, pp. 617-23.

7 The distancing gestures of both Climacus and Kierkegaard are, of course, incomplete. The *Postscript* is not withdrawn from publication. It remains for sale in the bookstores. And leaving both Climacus' Appendix "revocation" and Kierkegaard's unpaginated "first and last explanation" within the covers of an unabashedly pseudonymous text makes this two-step distancing itself partially suspect, the acts of a writer (or writers) still in partial ironic disguise. Paradoxically, the distancings may function both to call attention (directly) to the fact that what precedes is indirect communication – and also be themselves instances of indirect communication. If so, they are not to be taken entirely straightforwardly, but as freedom-enhancing existence-communications open to interpretation on roughly the same level as the rest of the *Postscript*. That is, despite appearances, they are not necessarily external and finally authoritative keys to the preceding text.

8 *CUP*, p. 79, trans. emended.

and inner forms of pathos, as in the startling contrast between Socrates' ignoble outward appearance and the alluring energy or pathos of his soul.[9]

> Pathos...[may be] expressed; but pathos in a contrary form is an inwardness that remains with the maker of the communication in spite of being expressed, and cannot be directly appropriated by another except through that other's self-activity: the contrast of the form is the measure of inwardness. The more complete the contrast of the form, the greater the inwardness, and the less contrast, up to the point of direct communication, the less the inwardness.[10]

In this case, we're startled awake by a tension between inner beauty and a repugnant exterior that forces us into an interpretative space – and makes the allure all the more significant for its having to overcome a countervailing aversion. But perhaps not all cases have this structure. Can subjectivity be awakened without provocation by such wildly tensed oppositions?

If I tell you that I've just become a grandfather, it's easy to imagine my commitments, my passions, close at hand. This simple transmission can evoke interpretations: you can begin to wonder what my being a grandfather *means* to me. Perhaps the wonder in my voice rubs off on you. An aperture appears for me, and you, a place for a silently voiced soliloquy where memories, exchanges with friends or aunts, can resound and flourish.

As I'm struck by my new grandfatherly position, reflections on who I am spring up. I'm given time – perhaps you give me time – to evoke the contours of my life, the flow of generational advance. There is space for subjectivity to resonate, to rebound in your inwardness as I speak – and in mine. I may find myself overtaken by the wonder and fear crystallized in the advent of a child, the fragile abundance of its coming to pass – of my passing, and of the passing of a world that both pulls me forward and leaves me behind. An important strand of who I am, perhaps overtly moral or religious strands of my identity, can become engaged and seek expression. The engagement may be episodic or signal a deeper turning, a shift in lasting ways signaled by the episode of my telling and my listening to my telling.[11]

When friends talk about the friendship that they share, there are ideas going back and forth, being imparted. As the friendship grows, it isn't a growth attributable to the "objective" meaning of accumulated sentences, but a growth attributable to *being* friends to one another, "ingesting" friendship in the talking, drawing on the *life* of friendship, and so letting it take a forward step. Insofar as the friendship *does* advance, each friend has imparted something to the other. Something has been

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9 We are reminded here of the complaint of Alcibiades at the close of Plato's *Symposium*, 221d-22b: Socrates seems ridiculous on the surface, yet within he is like an unattainable god one cannot but fall hopelessly in love with.

10 *CUP*, p. 217.

11 Subjectivity's engagements and responses and expressions occur along a continuum. Understanding another person, another culture, another religion can evoke our subjectivity short of evoking our identity-commitments or core; sometimes identity is only slightly stirred in the delivery or reception of an *intended* "indirect communication."

communicated, but it's not a packet of information. It's something like a *bloom* of increased life, increased life-in-passing.

These examples let us stretch and soften Climacus' account. The pathos of Socratic encounter, the passion of Lear's raging cries, the subtle irony of speaking pseudonyms are relatively dramatic cases of "indirect communication." But my mentioning that I've become a grandfather (for example), or that I really do cherish our years together (perhaps communicating this cherishing more in the soft intensity of a glance than in a word) – these are instances of imparting and transfer and "inter-animation" that should stretch our sense of the domain of what Climacus calls "indirect communication." It should stretch it toward the everyday, the unobtrusive but nonetheless important. It should stretch it toward those "simple" transfers, "inter-animations," impartings-receptions of just those affects, moods, virtues, passions, or orientations that make up rich and fragile lives.

In such unobtrusive transfer and inter-animation, the tension between external comportment – say, the slightly casual way I allude to my grandchild – and the inner radiance of meaning that stirs in ways that let you catch its beat does not immediately appear as sharply etched as in the case of a Socratic communication, where a gem shines through its rough packaging. But, then, maybe I *do* look rough in my impartings of affection. In any case, you catch something of my wonder and astonishment despite the low key, the "rough exterior," of my unremarkable words and bearing. Unobtrusive transfer can permeate the unremarkable (yet remarkable) daily round, much as Johannes de silentio's banal shopkeeping knight of faith slips by more or less invisibly.

Inwardness or subjectivity occur as matters of degree: ". . . the *more* complete the contrast of the form [of inner and outer expressed feeling], the *greater* the inwardness, and the *less* contrast, *up to the point* of direct communication, the less the inwardness."[12] Rather than two distinct categories of communication, there's a continuum and overlap. At one pole is affectless (virtueless) direct communication – say, of raw data that carries no immediate emotional or passional impact, no "subjective" content to receivers. Its polar contrast occurs when the dominant item of transmission is an affect or virtue or orientation that we "pick up on" – can't help but "pick up on." An extreme point of transfer of an "item" that's non-paraphrasable would be instanced in Molly Bloom's "Yes!" or Lear's "No!" – words whose proper delivery require a maximum of passion, attained, for example, by emphatic repetition: "*Yes! Yes!*" or "*No! No! No! No! No!*" A middle range of inter-animation or transfer could be instanced in a long soliloquy – say, a meditation on a grandchild. There we might find a good dose of discursively paraphrasable "content" imparted that was inextricably intertwined with non-paraphrasable affect, mood, stance, or virtue.

Sometimes it's not passion or virtue that gets transferred, but a kind of freedom – say, as Kierkegaard puts a play within a play, or as a pseudonym within the covers of one book talks to a pseudonym in another. And sometimes it's a commitment that gets transferred, as we'll see below. In any case, transfer requires artistry.

12 *CUP*, p. 217, my emphasis.

> Actually to communicate such a conviction would require art, . . . enough art to vary inexhaustibly, just as inwardness is inexhaustible, the doubly reflected form of the communication. The more art, the more inwardness.[13]

Artistry gives a word, a sentence, a "Yes" or a "No," a delivery, a manner of expression, the style of a certain affect, of a certain force or lack of force. Artistry links a word (caught in a "first reflection") with a manner of delivery (caught in a mobile "second reflection," its style, or force, or affect), as in Lear's "No!" or Molly's "Yes!", or as in an extended evening's reflection, shared with a friend.

Belief- vs Commitment-transfer

What Kierkegaard calls an indirect communication can transfer a passion, or a space for freedom, or a conviction or commitment. But transfer of a commitment is not transfer of a belief through a simple telling.

If I tell you I believe in honesty, you may credit my telling as truthful, and receive a belief by a kind of direct impress or transfer. You will believe *that* I believe in something, that *my* subjectivity is engaged. But that belief about me can leave *your* subjectivity untouched. In that case, a transfer or communication would be incomplete. My commitment would not carry over to instill commitment on your part. What Kierkegaard calls "indirect communication" would not have occurred.

Simple telling can bypass the transfer of commitment or conviction. I can tell you I believe in the power of poetry to soothe or ignite the soul, and you can understand and believe me, but whether you catch that commitment in my telling of it, let it take over as a budding aspiration you could come to call your own, is something else again.

To transfer my commitments to you, I'd take you aside, speak some poetry aloud to you, tell you about my favorites and how my favorites have changed. I'd ask you about your interests, ask if they ever bordered on the poetic: I'd try to kindle, or rekindle, your interest, by whatever means. It would take varied artistry to deliver the allure I feel and its claim on me. In time, I might wonder if some of my commitment had rubbed off on you: maybe I'd suspect it in the sparkle in your eye. But I'd be cautious, for perhaps the sparkle comes not because you've come to share my passion for poetry but because you love the attention I've been showering. Keeping alive the sparkle in my eye might be more important to you than keeping alive the line from Wordsworth. Similarly, I might believe in civic duty or friendship, and tell you of these commitments. I might tell you stories from my life, or bring you to spots where there was public work to do or where people suffered loneliness. But to awaken your moral passion or commitment would not be merely to tell you of mine.

Telling you that something matters to me does not license you to take it as important *to you*. To back a belief about what matters by citing another's belief is, in Climacus' terms, to "coagulate our identity in objectivity."[14] An artful moral teacher will avoid moralizing, intimidation, and rote imitation. She (or he) evokes a belief

13 *CUP*, p. 77.

14 *CUP*, p. 79.

that then gets acquired by another. She'll want also to insure that it gets acquired because it stands *worthy* of embrace – precisely *not* merely on the grounds that she, a teacher, *said* it was important.

My subjectivity, my aperture for reflection, cannot be transferred *en bloc* to you; it's an *opening* within which substance or content can be appropriated and expressed, and not itself a transferable substance or content. Nevertheless, you may find your own aperture of freedom widening in resonance with mine. "The secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the other free."[15] The "aperture of freedom" includes the opening through which passions, affects, attunements, commitments, convictions flow, and flow toward *you*. It's an aperture of *openness to otherness*. This openness Heidegger calls *Dasein*, which Thomas Sheehan translates, as we've seen, as "*the-openness-we-are.*" Valuing this aperture is valuing the soul. Picturing the confluence of attunement, strength, and passion in its ongoingness is the best picture we have of the soul. If some of my subjectivity, my soul, "rubs off" on you through a simple event – say, my telling you I'm newly a grandfather – the telling includes a fact, but also an opening for interpretation, and also an opening for my complex mood or attunement to have traveled on to encounter yours. You might say, in response, "Perhaps you're confronting your mortality in that newborn child." If these words resonate, a communication has elicited my subjectivity, and I send it back to yours.

Now, communication involves a sender and a receiver. What seems to be direct communication from a sender's side of a communication may be received as such; but it *may*, in some circumstances, evoke another's subjectivity in such a way that it functions, from the standpoint of the receiver, as an *indirect* transfer. An offhand apparently casual and indifferent aside may have soul-shattering effects: we are not in a position to predict, cause, or prevent decisive changes in another's subjectivity. And what we deliver from the trembling of a heart may be (mistakenly, tone-deafly) heard as simple information transfer. [16]

Exemplars and Artistry

If I teach "Thou shalt have no disciples" in such a way that disciples gather around, or if I teach "The unexamined life is not worth living" as a random truth for mindless duplication on exams, then I have failed to communicate an appropriate concern. The outcome, as Climacus would say, is comic. I will not have exemplified the relevant truth in the telling. To fail in this regard is to have failed to convey decisive subjectivity, a capacity for *living* in a certain way. "The thinker must present the human ideal . . . as an ethical requirement, as a challenge to the recipient to exist in it."[17]

Climacus wants the artistry of his Socrates to speak for itself, not be taken as a mask or disposable contrivance through which he, Climacus, or even Kierkegaard,

15 *CUP*, p. 74.

16 I thank Anthony Aumann for critical and helpful remarks. See his "Kierkegaard and the Need for Indirect Communication," dissertation, Indiana University, forthcoming 2007.

17 *CUP*, p. 358.

speaks. Inwardness lets an author retreat to the wings, allowing artistically rendered exemplars to step forward. Exemplars show how to live in truthfulness to "the human ideal . . . as an ethical requirement."

The ethico-religious individual is an *exemplar* of truth, not just a truth *teller*. What she stands for is not something that reduces to her *telling* something. Showing or exemplifying truth is distinct from stating truth. If an ethical or religious individual wishes to convey his truth, he must avoid the appearance and the reality of reducing it to a telling or a statement, even a roundabout telling. An indirect communicator can completely *bypass* a telling of their truth. In Dostoevsky's presentation, Christ tells the Grand Inquisitor nothing. He imparts the being of love not in words but in a kiss. An exemplar may even be *constrained* to bypass telling. Socrates would dodge telling if he thought his interlocutors were just looking for a slogan or principle to run with. If a Christian communication is the communication of compassion, that transfer can't be through words alone, certainly not by saying "be compassionate," or "I'm compassionate, follow me." Perhaps the Christian "existence communication" of compassion is most salient in silence, taking no part in what William James will call "the boundlessly loquacious mind."[18] After all, Kierkegaard fears the street chatter, academic chatter, news and other forms of direct, non-passionate "objective-only" communication doesn't activate the self. It's as if ethico-religious communication is "vanished from the world."[19]

Abraham and Socrates are exemplary. Exemplars can turn a soul, return a life. There is no telling through a simple statement *how* they turn a soul, *how* they impart a necessary passion. As Socrates puts it, "I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed from the vessel that was full to the one that was empty."[20] Repeating on cue "The unexamined life is not worth living" will not do for demonstration that Socrates has conveyed something essential to me – any more than growing a beard would accomplish this feat. My repeating "Always obey God!" or my avowing a willingness to climb Mt Moriah will establish that Abraham has *failed* to convey to me an essential truth.

Exemplars set a pattern that invites *successors*, a pattern that invites others to make it their own – without just mimicking or following by rote. But whether someone establishes that she is *in fact* a successor can be contested. Whether someone inherits the lessons the exemplar lived to teach may be unclear. How does a person today (or yesterday) follow the footsteps of Abraham or Socrates? We pursue exemplars for the possibilities they open. The first and negative phase is stripping something away: we realize we need clues, that we are not equal to every eventuality, that our questions outstrip our answers. Exemplars shatter complacency. The second, positive phase is acquiring new insight, taking new steps, however tentatively, attempting to continue a succession the exemplar founds. Intimate or passional communication knocks out the props and makes space for new ways of being.

An exemplar's life administers independence even as it bequeaths a pattern. Carrying on in the light of an exemplar differs from carrying on a doctrine, say

18 See Chapter Thirteen, below.

19 *Papers*, 47, VIII, 2, B 88.

20 *Symposium*, 175d.

of natural rights or of original sin, or carrying on a practice, say a ceremony of birth, marriage, or death. A handbook, catechism, or creed can be carried on through a ceremony or doctrine, but to carry on an exemplar's light is to move without a manual of directions or set of patterns to repeat. Accepting exemplars is commitment to them and to the path they light up. But the path they light will be our *own*:

> no one is so resigned as God; for he communicates in creating, so as by creating to *give* independence over against himself. The highest degree of resignation that a human being can have is to acknowledge the given independence in every man, and after the measure of his ability do all that can in truth be done to help someone preserve it.[21]

The independence necessary between persons and the divine is maintained by the artistry of the divine, who on pain of stealing freedom withdraws as creator from creation. Just so, the independence (and dependence) necessary between persons is maintained by a reciprocal artistry, respect, and withdrawal.

Exemplars and Portraits

In double reflection, the first thought can be told; and one has, secondly, a concern with the telling – or, better, one enacts a telling of the initial soon-to-be-born reflection. The first thought can be told, but its coming-to-be in the telling eludes a telling. The relation between thought and a telling that brings it to birth is a synthesizing relation that is constitutive of self, or of a strand of self.[22] A particular self in motion over time is a complex unfolding too rich to be exhaustively told. But there's also a deeper reason for a gap between a life or soul or self and any portrait of it.

The best portrait (conveyed by extensive and sensitive telling) will not leave the canvas or printed page to become a living self. Producing the reality that is my better self is distinct from producing an isolated portrait or snapshot of my self-to-be. What I learn in the light of an exemplar is not captured by doctrine or ceremony or telling, nor yet in narrative portraiture of the self I am and would be. An exemplar speaks through the ongoing existence of an exemplary life. "The [lived] concretion is the relation of the existence categories [thought, passion, imagination, relation to another, suffering, action] to one another."[23] These "existence categories" mark dimensions of reflection and action rebounding in embodied inwardness. As one lives *in* their truth they gel, achieve dynamic equilibrium. One's existence crystallizes as a concrete particular.

Climacus writes that we should give *artistic style* to our lives.[24] But sketched and reproduced as our existence, this artistry is clearly *not* a simple continuation of

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21 *CUP*, p. 260.

22 See my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, especially Chapter 8, for the self-relational web that constitutes a Kierkegaardian self in process.

23 *CUP*, p. 357. See also Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetic*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 208.

24 *CUP*, p. 357. Does this mean we should "sketch our own self-portraits in existence, reproducing in ourselves the human ideals toward which we strive"? Sylvia Walsh puts it this way in *Living Poetically*, p. 209. But we must distinguish, as Walsh herself does (pp. 240-41)

narrowly aesthetic self-portraiture. I can preen or sketch myself without moral striving or concerns. Exemplars will have little interest in commemorative or congratulatory self-portraits made to elicit the admiration of others. Portraits that are fanciful, narcissistic, or attached to merely interesting local detail, presentations that generally gloss over the seriousness of existence, are unreliable as ministering or prompting devices.[25] The aim of ethico-religious writing is to activate another's subjectivity, to effect a freedom transfer, to instill apt mood and disposition and orientation. Drawing one's soul in words or drawing it out in existence entails inter-animation, reciprocal openness to otherness. An exemplar's light on what might be my next and better self will give me contact with that exemplar's *life* (even if only lifted from a page). I need its living artistry, its full "existence communication." Just any narrative won't suffice. It can't be moribund, lifeless, *closed* to me.[26]

"The universal" for Hegel is precisely "the common" and whatever is shareable through language. Yet to live only the common or shareable is to lose *my* life, my particularity, my *own* uniquely modulated stance, orientation, affect, virtue.[27] A linguistically available "universal-to-be-communicated" (say, the simple truth that "the Socatic is the virtuous, noble life") will be in tension with something that can't be said, namely the truth we see and get in the actual living out of those truthful words. "Existence communication" is a living out of words that exceeds the dictionary meaning of those words. Narrative portraiture alone gives words that can remain at a distance from the living out of them, and so fail to be instrumental in invading and then transforming a soul. An apple most true to its own kind will never be an orange; it *must* fail in this regard. A portrait most true to its kind (most true to what a good portrait must be) will never be a self; it *necessarily* fails to be one. If the aim of Kierkegaard's and Climacus' writing is to effect a change in selves, then good writing, direct and indirect, can minister or pave the way, but it cannot deliver the goods – that is, write out a better self, one's own or another's.

Summary

The task of an ethico-religious individual is to communicate an identity, a life, expressed in words and deeds. Such expression can't be "objective-only" or "direct" because "direct communication" by design drops a communicator's subjectivity by the way. Attempting to communicate a decisive moral-religious core means intimate

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merely fanciful self-commentary or self-portraiture from the demands of weaving a concrete life in actual existence.

25 *CUP*, p. 358.

26 For the contrast between an "existence-communication" of "the universal" and "merely aesthetic" portraiture, see *CUP*, p. 358.

27 Hence *Fear and Trembling*'s knight of faith, who cannot avail himself of the Hegelian universal-as-language, is consigned to silence. See my discussion *in Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, p. 127-30. As we've remarked, Plato's Socrates also finds himself, in a sense, silenced, or at least impeded, in his communications: "I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed from the vessel that was full to the one that was empty." *Symposium*, 175d.

attention to that core, means mobilizing that core, readying it for distribution, for access by another, for another to learn from. Yet direct or "objective-only" communication demands that we disregard that intimate core of our subjectivity, which, if followed through, would be despair itself, would be to disavow oneself in the avowing of – not oneself, but nothing.

Intimate or artful communication can conceal an author's existence, letting an art work speak for itself, as when a pseudonym speaks for himself. This invites a hearer or reader to interpretation, and so calls on a freedom to interpret. The artful written or spoken word then makes contact by the designed absence of the author. The artful unfolding of a personal life, especially an exemplary life, also makes intimate contact. Exemplary persons may incidentally communicate through creating works of art, products that circulate in bookshops and museums. But they also elicit intimate response through the artistry of their acts, activities, and being – by what they say, but also by what they don't, by the way they walk or laugh, by the way they regard (or disregard) their children or their friends. An exemplary life speaks, but through the medium of existence, not of art, and what it speaks (and bespeaks) is more than uttered words.

An author may distance herself in order to let her art speak, but she may also become an exemplary person whose *life* speaks with artistry. Socrates does not write, but he is author of his life through conversation and speech, and, as we've seen in our early chapters, he is author of his life through courage, serenity, and loyalty, aspects of his life that have great appeal, through which the *life* speaks as true – true apart from any propositions that Socrates may utter. His artistry becomes the basis of our own love and loyalty, an imparting to us of affect, comportment, passions and virtues, that converge in who he is. The artistry is indistinguishable from the life.

Like an actor, Climacus stands artfully before us eliciting and requiring our response: "The subjective thinker's form . . . is his style . . . . His form must first and last be related to existence, and in this regard he must have at his disposal the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, the religious."[28] Exemplars solicit our freedom and display virtue, poetic eloquence, thoughtful intellect, piety and reverence. What sets exemplars apart from "objective-only" communicators is their "acting in asserting".[29] Any asserting is woven into a companion context of action, affect, orientation, and response that's in turn woven into a wider and extended narrative fabric that's exemplary of what life can be at its best. "The subjective thinker is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist. To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough for his life to have aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to master it."[30]

Double reflection allows a gap between a word available for saying and the sayer who will deliver it with *this* force, in *this* context, to *this* effect, expressing *this*

28 *CUP*, p. 357.

29 "Acting in asserting" is a phrase Kierkegaard uses in his "Job Discourse," discussed in my *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Chapter 3. Contemporary "speech-act theory" is here anticipated, although Kierkegaard's stress is on a saying's embeddedness in the "act" of an entire *life* rather than its role in a relatively isolated event such as my promise to return a book.

30 *CUP*, p. 351.

stance and affect – a gap to be exploited by an artist to conceal or to reveal. That space also allows for a life where that gap has been closed, where saying and sayer are one and exemplary, where one speaks or words the person one is – and one is one's word and world.[31]

31 See the role of "reduplication" in Kierkegaard's *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990 pp. 169; 484-5. When Kierkegaard writes "Christianity alone is direct speech" (I am the truth), Hannay, *Papers*, 37, II, A 184, he means to have speech and life converge and interpenetrate in a uniquely instantiated directness of speech-and-deed-and-life that exemplifies and communicates an identity of personal being and truth. The exemplification of living truth shows that truth inheres in exemplary persons, not just in propositions.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Postscript: Humor Takes it Back: Revocation Opens for Requited Time

An Unsystematic Appendix
to Philosophical Smidgeons
or Scraps of Philosophy.
– J. Climacus

After a delivery of over 600 *Postscript* pages, Johannes Climacus seems to have second thoughts: "*[E]verything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked.*"[1] The shock of this announcement might be the shock of discovering that a mad computer virus implanted in the closing pages now threatens to undo the entire book, making a mockery of our effort to absorb it. Does this undo his creation? Could it be that just as Abraham raises his knife against his progeny, so Climacus raises a knife against *his* creation? Why would Climacus stamp "*Not Mine!*" across his text?

Attunement

Taking back his words might be a symptom of a flawed character. Climacus might pull the rug from under all he's written in part to entertain us, but in part from fear of a commitment. Can he take his words to heart, make them his own? Of course, we assumed they *were* his own. Now they're not, apparently. Perhaps we're witness to a dance of moral indecision. He declines his words, refusing to have them be his own. Climacus might have a sharp ability to see exactly what it takes to become a Christian. And perhaps he even sees that the Christian path is the right one for him. However that may be, revocation might be just another sign that when the chips are down he'll refuse to walk the path. After all, he's a self-described humorist, which includes lingering, malingering, putting off what must be done.

A reading that puts Climacus in a better light would have his revocation signal a kind of gracious, even self-sacrificial, gesture. Through his revocation, he gives us a moral boost, relinquishing any authoritative say over the themes of his discussion, passing on authoritative say to us, as he leaves his stage. Through his recall on his words, he disowns authority over their meaning, prodding us to become our own free interpreters now the play is over. We're no longer to be bothered by his showy explications and dialectical somersaults.

1 *CUP*, p. 619.

Our challenge is to pick the proper time to set out on our own. Revocation is a provocation reminding us that it's time to leave securities (intellectual presumptions, *Postscript* securities) behind. At his instigation, through his self-sacrifice in relinquishing any hold on his book, we are given freedom to fend further on our own. That means leaving Climacus behind, taking his gentle hint as he shows us the door. He's no longer holding us spellbound. His revocation bids farewell, marks his release from his disquisitions and his release of us from them. His release is our release and permission to take on as our own the tasks that he's set out.

It's best to approach this idea by degrees. The appeal of taking revocation this way, as a release to become ourselves, to retrieve lost time and the things of worth abiding there, will emerge as we consider a number of overlapping readings.

Is Postscript *Disguised Nonsense?*

Is there a nasty puzzle at the core of the *Postscript*, a defect which just might prompt Climacus to revoke it? What if the book attempts to explicate the inexplicable? What if matters of faith or the soul or its passions are ultimately inexplicable? Should one write a 600-page book explaining that what one wants to explain can't be explained? If *Postscript* is attempting the impossible, there'd be every reason for Climacus to revoke it.

In the early 1960s Stanley Cavell noted that there was something quixotic in what appears to be Climacus' attempt to *defend* subjectivity. Philosophical defense by definition is an objective project.[2] Yet on second thoughts, that sort of quixotic project is not very foreign to philosophy. Kant, after all, uses reason to limit reason. And, in any case, Climacus is not really *interested* in offering a philosophical defense. He's conducting a kind of thought-experiment, trying out sketches that exemplify features of what must be wrapped up in a way of life, or in a way of living into a life – not trying to *justify* that life. Nevertheless, it can surely *seem* at times that Climacus is doing something academic and philosophical – objective.

Later in the 1960s Henry Allison argued that the arguments Climacus delivers are so *patently* flawed that Climacus must be talking tongue-in-cheek. If he *knows* it's bad philosophy, perhaps it's a good mimic or parody.[3] The point might be to parody his rival, Hegel – a kind of hoax at the expense of Hegelians or academics generally. The *Postscript*, like the "Hegelian System" that it mocks, collapses on itself like a house of cards – to our great amusement. We shouldn't laugh at Climacus for the foolishness of the *Postscript*. He knows what he's doing, and does it very well. So well, in fact, that ever-so-many professors think he's producing bona fide philosophy! The joke's on Hegel and anyone else who thinks he's serious about his "mimic-pathetic-dialectic," that most *unscholarly* anti-systematic postscript to some unassuming philosophical crumbs.

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2 Cavell's "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy" first appeared in *Daedalus*, Summer, 1964; it is reprinted in his *Themes Out of School*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

3 Henry Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 20, 1967, pp. 432-60.

Alastair Hannay has given us a masterful critique of Allison's classic statement, showing that Climacus' arguments aren't all that bad, and expanding the target of Climacus' humor to include not just Hegel and Hegelians but any number of other contemporary practitioners of the philosophical trade. I suspect that an appeal of the "bit of nonsense" view is that one can thereby invoke the early Wittgenstein, who held that his *Tractatus* was, in a way, a bit of nonsense – which sounds like he revokes it.[4] The *Tractatus* sequestered ethical and religious discourse on the far side of sense, to keep those most important things safe, as it were.

Could Kierkegaard hold that ethical-religious discourse should be sequestered on the far side of ordinary sense or discourse, and therefore "safe" from defilement? If so, he might have Climacus use a revocation to take his discourse out of action. But this can't quite work for *Postscript* revocation, for consider what a revocation typically implies.

In court, the accused petitions the judge to revoke his initial plea of innocence. Setting aside the matter of feints, ploys, cynicism, and manipulation, in the best case scenario we might assume that the change in plea signals a change of heart. The accused wants to own up to his acts, to make things right, to avoid the charade of innocence – and so revokes his plea. If Climacus' midnight-hour revocation follows this pattern, we'd expect he'd regret saying what he's said and now wants to change his story. Yet he says, as he announces his revocation, that he *doesn't* regret his testimony and that he *wouldn't* be better off had he never written out his book. And there's no evidence that Climacus is hankering to tell us the truth, now that he's distanced himself from his initial story. He won't write a second *Postscript* that gives a revised, more truthful account of those misleading claims that form the fabric of the testimony of *Postscript One*, now revoked.

It's a strange "revocation" if Climacus shows no sign of wanting to change his tune. It hardly seems he'll want to flatly *deny* that truth is subjectivity, that faith is a passion. It hardly seems we'll want to *deny* that inwardness or heartfeltness is

4 See "Climacus among the Philosophers," in Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2003, Chapter 1. See also James Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense," in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, eds, *Pursuits of Reason*, Lobbock, TX: Texas Technical University Press, 1993. Cavell suggests in "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy" that Kierkegaard becomes comically and self-defeatingly objective in his defense of subjectivity. This implies (it seems) that if you think hard (subjectively – but also objectively?) about religious language along the lines Kierkegaard suggests, you end up in silence, or if you keep speaking, you realize you're speaking nonsense. In his essay, "Cavell and the Concept of America," in Russell Goodman, ed., *Contending with Cavell*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, Conant comments helpfully that the Kierkegaard-Climacus' concept of subjectivity does not deserve associations that it's often saddled with – "the private," or "ineffable," or "preconceptual."

something of surpassing worth to cherish.[5] Yet if these are not revoked, retracted, disavowed, in his revocation, what is? [6] (I'll return to this question.)

For the moment, we can put a finer point on this idea that *Postscript* might be a bit of nonsense. We can take a clue from the possibility that Climacus might be anticipating a Vienna Circle position on the status of religious discourse. He might retract his text not in favor of hopes for an improved version, but to withdraw it from contention altogether. He declines to endorse the idea that truth is subjectivity not because he believes that truth is objectivity, but because he thinks it's "nonsense" to make either claim. He revokes the idea that faith is a passion not because he thinks that faith is indifference, but because one shouldn't try to speak about such matters, one way or the other. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ends famously with the pronouncement that where one cannot speak (about the highest matters), one must be silent. And the Vienna Circle conclusion was not that religious statements are false (and should be corrected). It was that they are neither true nor false, just nonsense. But *Postscript* is not apophatic in this way.

Kierkegaard puts Climacus to work writing what he takes to be his last and greatest work. His mordant critique of "assistant profs", for instance, has a telling bite. The critique is not just a string of sentences that at last are deemed "neither true nor false." His exploration of subjectivity is far too telling to deserve the empty verdict, "neither true nor false." So, too, his explorations of indirect communication and the primacy of the passions deserve more than the neutralizing "neither true nor false." There's substance there to honor. A humorist can make serious points.

On the whole, then, the idea that *Postscript*'s revocation is a signal that a bit of nonsense is afoot is unpersuasive, though it provides a provocative point of entry to the matter. There are two other preliminary readings to consider before I turn to readings that locate Climacus' revocation in moral space, a gesture enacting one or another moral virtue.

Kicking the Ladder Away.

Climacus is on a ladder, or perhaps *is* a ladder, for our convenience. Once we've climbed, we can kick it (and him) aside. Wittgenstein uses this image in the *Tractatus*, having Kierkegaard in mind. Once one gets a joke (or solves a detective mystery), one can safely set the joke or mystery aside. On balance, though, the ladder image

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5 I take Climacus' little discussed aside that "subjectivity is untruth" to be a subtle qualification of the deep subjectivity he endorses throughout *Postscript* – not a flat rejection of it. The sort of "non-subjectivity" he alludes to in this aside is far from the "objectivity" of "assistant profs" that he always finds inadequate with no qualification whatsoever. See *CUP*, p. 207; and Lee Barrett's helpful discussion in "Subjectivity is (Un)Truth: Climacus' Dialectically Sharpened Pathos," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Athens, GA: Mercer University Press,1997.

6 Perhaps the revocation is a false alarm, *itself* feigned, bluffed, spurious, an ironic jest. Climacus finishes his speech, then mumbles, "*What do I know! Hey! Maybe I'll take it all back!*" Then adds, with a wink, "*Just kidding!*" This option would preserve the substance and tenor of the text – and leave the sense of irony and humor. But I don't think Climacus *is* kidding in his retraction.

fails. Most jokes have a single point, and mysteries a single solution. But *Postscript* is more like a four-act comedy, farce, or tragi-comedy, something not to set or kick aside, but something to revisit that repays endless review and reinterpretation. Of course, we can periodically set *Postscript* aside for other matters. But we don't do this with the finality or closure that marks finishing a puzzle. *Postscript* is obviously *never* finished in that sense!

Court Jester

Taking something back can be slapstick and cruel. I give you a sparkling invitation. Then, to your chagrin (and my audience's no doubt callous delight), I grab it back, revoke it. April fool! If revocation is part of an insider's joke, it shows who's in and who's out, a kind of one-upmanship, an insider's parody made to tickle a subgroup of philosophers – those who get the joke on Hegel.

Postscript, of course, *is* ridiculously funny. Consider the title in a lighter vein than usual: *An Unsystematic Appendix to Philosophical Smidgeons* or *Scraps of Philosophy*: *A Mimic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation: An Existential Plea or Intervention*. The mimicry is slapstick. It's easy to see Hegel's Scientific System as the target, but the target can also be the vanity of philosophy more generally.[7] Climacus the jester might be a Shakespearean fool, uniquely wise, performing to a half-deaf king. He might be a brilliant thinker who's deadly serious in his jests, throwing crumbs – or pearls – to swine. And he no doubt throws a crumb toward professorial kings behind their academic desks.

The mockery might go inward, too. Self-applied or self-administered, parody and jest might work to hide the jester's shame, his unwillingness to swim the currents of a Christian life. Climacus acts out the difference between *seeing* the truth and acting *in* the truth, a sad dithering figure forever advancing toward the brink, then hesitating. And we're to recognize *ourselves* in his fool's mirror. This is not a laughing matter.

Readings in Moral Space

Deferring Resolution

In the large-scale context of the book, revocation is the paralysis of an author in an only half-acknowledged game of hide-and-seek. Climacus is a self-described humorist who knows the requirements of a Christian life and dances away. As one critic puts it, his revocation is a "higher-order flinch in the face of the strenuousness of Christian life."[8] Climacus understands the trials and suffering internal to the

7 See the extended treatment of these issues in John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000. Allison suggests this.

8 Steve Webb conveyed this characterization in correspondence. He continues, "Since the Christianity [Climacus] outlines is full of burdens and trials which he personally is incapable of taking on, should we be totally surprised to find him shrugging it all off in one

tortured path of Christian life. To embark would mean owning up to guilt or fault – his *own* – and taking corrective steps. But Climacus blinks. He peeks in at a world he wants to enter, but dares not, and so covers over his irresolve in a ridiculous retraction of the desire.

To say the mood of *Postscript* is one of humor means that its endless string of jests, comic interludes, sentimental digressions, brilliant logical maneuvers, social criticism, satire, system-building, stage-elaboration can – *all of it* – be taken as deferral and delay. Humor distances us from seriousness. Climacus' real responsibility is to leave the ranks of observers, commentators, and humorists. Rather than finding traction in a Christian life, Climacus cavorts, an Aristophanic comic hoisted halfway to the clouds.

Going after Gravitas

There's something impish, even wryly wicked, about Climacus' revocation – as if we're made victims of a *prank*. Alastair Hannay provides the image of a mischievous kid who rings the doorbell and dashes away.[9] We answer, but no one's there. Climacus might hide as a prank but also to *undo misplaced seriousness.* This disappearing act unsettles the text by qualifying its *force* – leaving its *substance* intact. A jester can leave intact the thought that truth is subjectivity while making sure the register in which we *take* it is lightness, not weightiness. Irony and humor abrade the misplaced *gravitas of Doctrine*.

Revocation doesn't take back central *Postscript* claims, but takes back any doctrinal weight that might have unhappily become attached to them. There's no *doctrine* of "subjectivity," or "the paradox," or "passion," and so no doctrine to promulgate or come to know. Revocation's target is *how* we hold these views – lightly or woodenly, fanatically or flexibly, as guarantees or as fragile hopes, as philosophically established or as philosophically uncertain or absurd.

It's not just that a manner of delivery should be considered *along with* whatever is delivered. A *how* of delivery can establish the *what* that's received. A *how* that deflates the air of Doctrine establishes that *what* we entertain is *not Doctrine*. Irony and humor undo Doctrine in the name of gentle invitation: "Why not give subjectivity a try*?*" That manner of delivery leaves room for truths with a light pedestrian gait. It leaves room for the truth, for example, that it's worth attending more closely to the heart. In addition, as a humorist (and part-time ironist) Climacus escapes being mistaken for someone wielding grave authority, someone who might use the force of reason or charisma or forceful rhetoric to *impose* authority. Jest pummels presumption, gravitas, and misplaced self-importance. His revocation removes two

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last great jest – as if this huge, highly opinionated book on the hardships of Christianity could not possibly be of interest to anyone except himself and his imaginary ideal reader?"

9 See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 104 and also, p. 313. *From the Papers of One Still Living* previews the *Postscript* in one respect. Remarkably, it has a revocation in a postscript to its Preface. See *From the Papers of One Still Living*, in Søren Kierkegaard, *Early Polemical Writings*, ed. and trans. Julia Watkin, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.

misapprehensions: first, that weighty doctrine had been at issue, and second that he is the heavy delivering it. Taking doctrine, didacticism, and oneself as all that *precious* diminishes the person addressed.

Relinquishing Authority

In ringing the bell, dropping the text on the steps and rushing off, Climacus revokes or gives up ownership. He releases claims to possess sole rights to its meaning. This transfers authority for textual preservation on to us. We're free to raise the text from the temporary death to which revocation had consigned it.

Climacus opens his retraction paragraph observing that some texts end by announcing that everything so far said accords, let us say, with the authority of "the holy universal mother Church."[10] Of course, Climacus not only abstains from seeking the authority of a church – or any figure or institution outside the text – to back his words. Impishly, he disowns or abdicates even his *own* authority over the meaning of his words. He won't take a stance toward *his* approved work parallel to the stance that "the holy universal mother church" takes to *her* approved works.

Picking up the book, we grant Climacus a probationary license to set out its meaning. By the time we're done, that speech and performance will have taken on a life of its own. The probationary license will expire, and it will be up to us whether the text earns a lasting significance, a standing license to speak, as it were. At first Climacus is the weight behind the words. Yet in the long run, as midwife, he ministers and assists. The lion's share of labor gradually becomes ours as we work through *Postscript*'s dialectical thickets. Thus, in the revocation it becomes *decisively* ours.

Plato has Socrates retreat in ignorance, leaving questions in our lap. Climacus abdicates the limelight, leaving questions in our lap. Through his abdication, he prevents me from citing *him* as an expert. I can't tout the authority of an author who revokes it. As Climacus avows, he's no better placed to fully understand the role he's just performed (or the meaning of his claims) than any other spectator. The rough patches in the text or in the life it addresses are *our* rough patches now.

Climacus releases me into my ethical maturity, to assume my subjectivity, or what Kant would call my majority, no longer subject to the tutelage of another. This is pedagogical respect for a learner's independence. Freedom in maturity is, of course, Kant's definition of Enlightenment. Kierkegaard holds to this aspiration to free an individual to think and do on her own. He differs from other Enlightenment defenders on whether accumulation of ever-more knowledge is at last a liberation. Perhaps clamor about knowledge drowns out the most important truths.

Renouncing Final Understanding.

As Kant would have it, to pursue unlimited knowledge or understanding through the ministrations of unlimited reason is to chase a chimera. It's to defy metaphysical limits on our cognitive powers. Kierkegaard expands this Kantian point. To understand

10 *CUP*, p. 619.

faith (or subjectivity) is to revoke the exorbitant claim that faith (or subjectivity) is something one fully grasps through the ministrations of reason or understanding.[11] *Postscript*'s theme is faith, but it can't give us – must deny us – a mastery of faith.

Kant saw cognitive humility as following from our lack of access to the thing-in-itself. Kierkegaard expands this point, giving it an existential twist. Understanding typically lets us relax and set a perplexity aside. But if you think you've understood faith, or subjectivity, and so can set them aside, think again; you clearly *haven't* understood. In existential matters – death, love, or happiness, for instance – understanding will always be unfinished, part of your becoming. And so these matters indicate an endless task that ends in wonder – a wonder that derails the certainties of explanation or straightforward cognitive grasp. The chimera of complacent *finished understanding* must be revoked. Revocation sets us ill at ease again, perplexed, as we should be. We are once more, as Hamlet has it, "wonder wounded hearers."[12]

Alastair Hannay suggests that *Postscript* continues Kierkegaard's early venture in recasting Faust, a figure in pursuit of boundless knowledge and understanding. In Kierkegaard's novel twist, a more worthy Faust gains his soul by renouncing knowledge, by *selling off* his hope for boundless understanding, renouncing it.[13]

To gain a soul is not to take another step toward knowledge. It's to be overtaken by something elusive of surpassing value. A condition of true understanding then becomes accepting things that will defy it.[14] Kant saw that we don't fully grasp, cannot fully represent, the presence of the ubiquitous "I think" or the pull of ever-present regulative ideals. These ideals attract and repel, in a dynamic that suggests their existential counterpart, the onset of Kierkegaard's *anxious ethical sublime*. Life magnificently and achingly depends on yielding to their inescapable, opaque powers. We honor the pull of Freedom, say, or God, even as these surpass our cognition. Will and affect are informed by what eludes the mind. At last there's strength in refusing quests for infinitude. This refusal keeps us ever alert to the advent of the wondrous in our finitude, in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary.

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11 The broad brush I've adopted blurs, harmlessly, I think, the Kantian contrast of reason and understanding.

12 *Hamlet*, V., i, 242.

13 See Hannay, *Biography*, pp. 117-18, 311.

14 Wittgenstein often wrote in this vein, no doubt having Kierkegaard in mind. In one instance, he warns a friend that the most important part of the *Tractatus* is what lies outside it, beyond its understanding. It's sometimes argued that insiders reach a full understanding (denied to outsiders) where this "paradox" disappears. Outsiders, on this view, are consigned to an always unfinished restless search. Thus only outsiders like Climacus see faith as absurd, or a paradox, or beyond understanding. Perhaps Climacus exaggerates what is only a surface tension. After all, part of our proper appreciation of reason, on Kant's view, is using reason to chart reason's limits. That aside, even if one were to "arrive" at faith, would Kierkegaard say that one is then free to set aside the struggle for faith, or the struggle to understand? Faith is not complacency, but tied essentially to struggle and cognitive uncertainty. De silentio's knight of faith must *continually* make his dance-like double movement. He has sufficient understanding for the dance to go on, but not enough to "rest content" in his understanding of it.

Revocation as a Door to Special Goods

Humility in understanding or knowledge is a good thing on its own. It's also good because it opens possibilities not otherwise available. It then becomes *enabling*, ceding access to goods denied us so long as we presume to fully know or understand them. Revocation gives us freedom to interpret, which can expand understanding, but understanding cannot move outward limitlessly. It collides with metaphysical barriers. This collision enacts a kind of higher-level revocation – we're *rebuked* – this time in the service of surpassing values. The Faustian aim of boundless knowledge-acquisition is futile, and in the deepest sense, an assault on life. Kant thought that in light of reason's limits, we'd relinquish reson's will-to-mastery, a quieting that would allow a person to be infused by a surpassing, yet elusive, value. In his case, that value is faith, but also, for him, it's the enablement of freedom. Socratic ignorance and Kantian restraint on the forward push of knowledge make space for something other.

Things of wonder, awe, or mystery are not there to grasp or master. We don't get contact by pushing on them. They swing toward us. We have to step back out of the way, listen, let be. They grasp or clutch or overwhelm us, defying a rampant urge for understanding that would master *them*. We rightly yield to things that captivate, that capture *us*: seascapes, math, the Tour de France; God or mirth, Schubert or children. Each reaches out to us. As we fall in love or wonder with these, they remain forever longingly *beyond* our grasp. And it's our passions as much as their objects that surpass and surprise us. In a phrase we've heard before, George Pattison writes, "Beyond the question of knowledge are poetry, madness, and love – but if these are not and cannot be knowledge, they may yet be best of all."[15]

Final Thoughts

Let's restate the gist of these several interpretations of *Postscript*'s retraction. There were three attuning possibilities: bit of nonsense, kicked ladder, court jester. And then we moved to several other related and overlapping possibilities that give us ways to engage with Climacus' revocation. In particular, each of these latter options intimates a virtue that defines a strand of moral space: decisiveness, freedom from doctrinaire didacticism, pedagogical respect, cognitive humility, and openness to the best of things.

- Revocation is *irresolution*: by satirizing its lack, revocation reminds us not to *shy from decision.*
- Revocation is undoing self-important gravitas: it reminds us to *undo the weightiness of doctrine and didacticism*.
- Revocation is benevolent *abdication*: it reminds us to reign in totalistic *claims to tutorial or pedagogical authority*.

15 George Pattison, *A Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, London: SCM Press, 2001 p. 142.

- Revocation is an existential enactment of Kantian *cognitive humility*: it's refusal of *a Faustian drive for total mastery through a misplaced aspiration for infinite cognitive grip*.
- Revocation is a Socratic clean up that gives access to things of utmost worth: it offers to *open toward ultimate goods otherwise denied.*

Climacus is indeed Socrates and anti-Faust, first and last.

Socratic ignorance is carried by Climacus and Kierkegaard in gestures, revocations, and rebukes, aimed to free their interlocutors to find their way. As mentor, Kierkegaard-Socrates abstains from imposing Doctrine or Truth, and models openness to a good he makes no claim to master, to a good he can't capture and serve up in propositions that we could bind into a book, or band behind in a parade of knowledge. Redemptive or saving knowledge is *self-knowledge*, what we find in ourselves to pledge, to own, to *testify* to, to claim as *orientation:* it's tactile knowledge woven into the very fabric of acting, living, undergoing. It's knowledge exemplified *there in that life*, not in propositions. Academic festivals that celebrate cognitive advance have their place, but our deepest need is contact, wondrous contact, through particular encounters – *as* particular persons, *with* particular words and things, *with* particular persons – one by one.

Socratic convictions – that an unexamined life is not worth living, or that philosophy begins in wonder, or that it is better to suffer than to do harm – are, as we've seen, truths or convictions that are modeled in his living of them, his dying with them, in his talks with Diotima, in his defense before his city. Holding fast to them seems a kind of faith, where a strange mix of skepticism, ignorance, and deep conviction brings him in stride with Kierkegaard, and they become akin.[16] Neither would embrace a Faust, stalking a well-defined and guiding *knowledge*, fit for everywhere and eternity. To turn one's back on this obsession is to be released toward living with and for love or beauty, with and for poetry or adventure, justice or friendship or the divine, even as these outflank a drive for final comprehension.

16 See Chapter Three, above.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Discourses: Plenitude and Prayer: Words Instill Silence: To What End?

If the point is doing what
is true, the one docent more
is a new calamity.
– Papers, 1849

The assortment of persons drawn to Kierkegaard's discourses is no doubt endless – poets, theologians, philosophers, preachers, the imprisoned.[1] These brief writings, digestible at a sitting, are meant to cultivate, form, or animate a soul, without regard to their reader's status, learning, occupation, or wit. Kierkegaard addresses each discourse intimately to one he calls "my reader," the "special individual" he hopes will listen, read, in special confidence. As in the refrain of a song of unrequited love, he seeks a special intimate who will accept his welcoming address. But who is that "special individual" he calls "my reader"? Perhaps several will understand him. Nonetheless, each is addressed uniquely as "*my* reader." The tone confides loss and hope for reconciliation. Can I escape the passing thought that these words are addressed quietly, revealingly, to *me*? And if I am indeed now privately addressed, how am I to respond? With abstractions, formalities, or scholarly disquisition? Appeals to the heart plead for answers from the heart.

Different works from my shelf of Kierkegaard address me differently. The massive *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* swaggers, struts, and stings with mock-scholarly rigor. *Fear and Trembling*, in its early lyric sections, sings with the romantic ardor of the hero and his publicist.[2] Both can seem theatrical – the *Postscript*, for example, in its satire and parody of academic nonsense. Of course, *Postscript* is not only that. Most books from Kierkegaard-and-company have serious points to make in addition to whatever role lyric, irony, or parody might play in their delivery.[3] Yet the early discourses seem to be the exception here. They have no glittering, witty, ironic surface to dig beneath. They seem, shall we say, sincere – in the best sense, "simple," but nonetheless profound and endlessly repaying thoughtful attention. They elaborate themes and motifs with clear counterparts in the more dialectical, literary, and lyrical pseudonymous works. "Repetition" and the long-suffering Job appear both in the

1 I have in mind figures as diverse as W.H. Auden, Martin Heidegger, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

2 See my *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991.

3 For the theatrics of *Fear and Trembling*, see Chapter Eight.

book *Repetition* and in the early discourse "The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away." Kierkegaard meant the sermonic discourses to be read alongside the literary pseudonymous works. He took pains to have "The Job Discourse" and *Repetition* published simultaneously in 1843.[4]

Whatever the overlap of theme and motif among the early discourses and the rest of the authorship, the former stand out in their relative simplicity of address, lacking artifice, and also in their demanding something "plain and simple." The discourses leave us profoundly quieted, "simplified" – even as a correlative "plain and simple" response might start to brew. As a consequence, I can feel that their intent and spirit are violated if I treat them only academically. To do so would violate a religious silence that they instill. The academic heart and mind is put at odds with the religious mind and heart. Why should this be? William James gives us a clue.

James refers to the boundless "loquaciousness" of the "rationalist" mind in its encounter with religious experience.[5] And he reminds us that such boundless loquaciousness all too easily overrides our "gut feelings" and instincts. These are an essential source of our being, and part and parcel of any deep immersion in the flow of religious experience. James claims that an exclusively rationalist or discursive loquaciousness will darken the center of religious experience.[6] The rich phenomena that initially trigger our reflective interest can quickly disappear under the pressure to provide a discursive account *of* that phenomenon. Something gets lost in translation as one moves from the immediacy of religious reception and response to the "loquaciousness" that is adopted as essential to transform an impact, impulse or response into a well-formed proposition for examination and debate.

From a purely academic point of view, it's a bad thing to forget the interests and phenomena that set us down a discursive, conversational, or dialectical path. But from a more deeply spiritual, existential, or religious point of view, it's a bad thing also. We are full-time human beings even as we're professional academics.[7] A concern for the fullness of our lives means that we have an urgent, "existential" stake in those "felt-convictions" that form the fabric of our lives. A flurry of discussion or debate can easily suppress the reflective immediacy of religious feeling and

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4 I discuss "The Job Discourse" from *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* and its connection to "repetition" in Chapter 3 of *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, New York: Routledge, 1996; and I discuss "repetition" above in Chapter Nine. I place it as a barrier against nihilism in "Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition," *Kierkegaard Newsletter*, March, 2002.

5 See the use of these passages from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 52.

6 See "The Sentiment of Rationality" and "The Will to Believe," collected in *William James: The Essential Writings*, ed. Bruce Wilshire, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986, as well as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, many editions.

7 TV news anchor Dan Rather "unprofessionally" broke into tears on camera recalling the events of September 11, 2001. David Letterman comforted him with the words: "You're a professional – and for God's sake, you're a human being!" As Kierkegaard might plead, "You're an academic – and for God's sake, you're a human being!" But, first, he'd have to open our eyes, as September 11 opened Rather's eyes.

conviction. Kierkegaard would resist an impertinent "loquaciousness" that drowns out a religious mood or ambiance, the space that deep-felt spiritual convictions inhabit.

If I'm on track here, there are several questions to ask: What is it about a discourse that issues a "silencing effect"? How is this silence at odds with the requirements of an academic project? Could conflating the religious and the academic violate a latent taboo? What sorts of "experience," "intuitions," or "felt-convictions" are at stake for Kierkegaard in his drive to establish quietude? Finally, in what light can these "felt-convictions" be seen as matters of ultimate concern, well worth preserving? The first query asks how can discourses instill silence?

Instilling Silence

As I read parts of the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* before me, I do not find *Postscript* puzzles or dialectics to which I can respond by removing or intensifying or explaining their sting. Nor do I find the lyrics, parables, fairy tales, or imaginative inventions of that "freelance" poet and dialectician Johannes de silentio who pens *Fear and Trembling*. The discourses do not seem geared to provoke what James called a "loquacious" philosophical, literary, theological, or psychological response. Instead, they invoke a state of being or composure rather different from a readiness to engage in a discursive response. They do not immediately put at stake my powers of wit or intellectual insight or interpretative finesse. Instead, they seem to put at stake the very core of my religious, spiritual being. They don't ask me to consider the *importance* of quietude. They seem bound to *enact* or *instill* that state of quietude. If I resist, I resist not a claim or viewpoint, but the attempt of words to place me somewhere I hesitate to go. Thus these early discourses cry out *not* to be commented on – especially not in standard *academese*. We may refuse them, it seems, but not argue with them – perhaps not even discuss them. This is the radical, and for the most part unarticulated, possibility I want to explore and elaborate here.

We have before us writings to be read as sermons, however "unauthorized" or "unofficial" they may be from the standpoint of the institutional Christianity in place in Kierkegaard's Copenhagen. As Kierkegaard is quick to remind us in the opening prefaces to each of the discourse sets, their author has not been invested with ecclesiastical authority to preach bona fide sermons. Nevertheless, the fact that he feels compelled to insert such a prefatory note emphasizes the point that the writing is immediately recognizable as "sermonic," with a declared scriptural "lesson," and an intimate maternal (or paternal) preacherly address. Two of the earliest of these early eighteen discourses begin forthrightly with a prayer. These are neither speeches before a debating society nor diversions printed up for an evening's read or cafe-society discussion. They are not treatises to be debated by academic and cultural elites, nor meant to win votes in the next election. As sermonic, they only accidentally end up on library shelves as part of an archival record.

This characterization of the discourses as presupposing a frankly sermonic setting involves papering over some subtle complications. I spell out these qualifications at length below. But, for the moment, it's safe to say that the immediate impact of

the discourses is to evoke the setting of sermons heard "live" by a worshipping congregation. They are part of a ceremonial address within the architectural confines of a church or cathedral, and part of the longer address, including music and liturgy that makes up a practice of religious worship within a recognizable tradition.

The silence or quiet instilled is an outcome of their design as vehicles of worship, constituent parts of its practice. Worship requires, among other things, a reverence for something other than ourselves. It might be expressed in sounds of joy responsive to something "other" and "prior," responsive to the wondrous, sacred, or holy. These words would respond to powers that initially quiet and defeat our typically inflated sense of self-centeredness, self-importance, and readiness to hold forth – our readiness to speak out on *our* terms. Worship quiets the clamorous soul.

Understanding this power of words to stop wordiness, or even to stop an inept type of thinking, relies on a rough contrast between discursive and non-discursive use of language. I might vocalize loudly a sound that others would identify easily as "teach!" I might shout it with the single aim of testing the resonance of a concert hall. This would be as close to a purely non-discursive utterance of language as I can imagine. In fact, the utterance may have left the domain of language entirely, and be considered best as merely sound. For, in the context of testing acoustics, almost any vocalization would have served as well. In contrast, imagine a purely discursive uptake of "teach," as when I have a friend read the entry for "teach" from my etymological dictionary. I could find myself utterly concentrated on the information conveyed, oblivious to any affect in, or wider surrounding for, my friend's reading. I sift single-mindedly for the discursive sense alone. In practice, discursive and non-discursively linguistic reception-and-response will often occur simultaneously. A love song will affect me discursively through its words, and also non-discursively through its melody. I might attend, or take up, the verse discursively, for content, and then attentively take up the melodic line. First and last, I'd find the words and lyric intonation merge imperceptibly as one.

Think of T.S. Eliot's lovely verse, "Teach us to care and not to care; Teach us to sit still."[8] I could listen for a discursive "message" to ponder intellectually and to interpret, perhaps against the background of various religious and cultural traditions. Alternatively, I might become immersed in the non-discursive rhythm, repetition, and alliteration of words – hearing the music of the verse, as it were. Or, letting a contrasting dimension settle in, I might hear it neither as message alone (a claim, for example, that it's good to sit still, a claim to ponder or assess), nor as "music" alone (words to be enjoyed as I might enjoy poetry read aloud in a language I do not understand). Instead, this third attunement might let me catch a cry in the verse, a cry for help: "Lord, *help* me to care!"

Kierkegaard's early discourses offer words that can be taken up discursively or non-discursively, or both simultaneously – not unlike the variety of ways we can take up with Eliot's "Teach us to care and not to care." To catch the flow and focus of these early discourses relies on our familiarity with scriptural themes and passages. It relies on a discursive attunement. Yet there is also obvious poetic music in their

8 T.S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday," in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*, New York: Harcourt, 1991.

unfolding, and catching this flow and focus relies on a non-discursive attunement. And perhaps the dominant attunement these discourses offer or effect is a sort of quietude. To be caught up in this quietude relies on a non-discursive attunement. It's as if their culminating impact were to let the discursive Wittgensteinian ladder fall away as we attain – or are taken over by, or taken to – a spirit of quiet worship or prayer. If they in fact effect a religious stillness, a clamorous aspect of the self is quieted while a comforted, quiet aspect of the self is energized. Words build even as they silence.[9]

Words in discursive space invite discursive response, and when we respond to sentences discursively we have already, by our response, assumed a discursive background to the words we address. Consider an architectural analogy. If I enter a cathedral carrying scaffolding to repair chipped plaster, to that extent I enter a space demanding a carpenter's and plasterer's response. If I enter a cathedral with a video-camera to catch the play of light on mullioned glass, to that extent I enter a space inviting a tourist's or art historian's response. If I enter a cathedral in which a funeral is being conducted, I may have a journalistic aim: to list the dignitaries present and mark what they say for the morning edition. On the other hand, I may set camera and notepad aside, enter a space of mourning and eulogy, and join in worshipful communion.

Kierkegaard invites us to a place of liturgy, worship, and prayer. In the cathedral of these discourses one *can* take notes on the prayer, identify the historical context of scriptural allusions, or become fascinated with alliteration or metaphor. Or one might become fascinated with this congregation's fashionable Sunday attire. How do we attend to *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*? Our attention will vary as we locate ourselves as academics, worshipers, or bibliophiles. Our stance will unveil, or alter, or selectively distort the space they occupy.

A Kierkegaardian discourse can serve as a crib for next Sunday's sermon, as a challenge to one's translation abilities, or as the bookend to a crowded shelf. More aptly, I might sift the discourses for accounts of humility, patience, or love, to be instructed. Or I might line them up with corresponding *Postscript* passages for mutual illumination.[10] I could take up early discourse expositions of steadfastness or The Book of Job and compare these with familiar religious, secular, or literary accounts of their themes. But I might also hear these discourses religiously and non-comparatively, letting them quiet the soul. If they are like a heaven-reaching gothic arch that humbles and readies us for prayer, and if we respond in keeping, then they will suppress an exclusively academic, loquacious mind. An academic response is permitted, even to some extent encouraged by the discourses – just as a great

9 For a parallel discussion of the way prayer both instills and quiets passions, see my "Becoming What We Pray: Passion's Gentler Resolutions," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, Chapter 3. To instill quiet is an instance of indirect communication wherein a state of being is communicated, not a claim about this or that. See Chapter Eleven above.

10 See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, Theology*, New York: Routledge 2002; and Michael Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard from Irony to Edification*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.

cathedral can permit, even encourage a glazier's, photographer's, or art historian's response. But we'd sense that for worshipers, the cathedral must at some basic level repel attempts to capture its resonances exclusively through the eye of the glazier, photographer, or historian. The early discourses, for a reader in the least attuned to the background of Christian worship and its traditions, evoke a context of worship and prayer: and they evoke, instill, a strain of non-discursive quiet thoughtfulness.

Academic Opposition

The context of worship, prayer, and reverence that these discourses sustain accounts for their palpable "silencing," quieting effect. Turning to our next large question, we can ask how a context sustaining reverence can become opposed to a context sustaining academic pursuits.

It is not an accident, as Kierkegaard surely knows, that what James called the "loquaciousness" of the "rational mind" can both sweep away the phenomena of quiet worship or prayer and also cripple our understanding of the latter's importance. These discourses instill an attitude of *communion with* – not abstract *thoughts about* – the words through which we are addressed. But the discursive mind is geared precisely to focus with some detachment *on and about* its issues. This is a gearing that goes counter to demands for communion *in and with* the words or issues of a discourse. Even the most sympathetic reader of the discourses risks overlooking or violating their letter and their spirit, which can never be academic only, but always prominently religious.

Blurring this distinction between a religious and an academic uptake and response can be seen, first, as an intellectual *confusion of categories*, a violation of the conceptual distinction between scholarly academic response and religiously modulated response. Seen from this angle, one remedy would be to square up our dialectical response-frames in order to more precisely mark the divide between "the religious" and "the scholarly." Perhaps that's a Kierkegaardian *Postscript* aim.

Alternatively, blurring this distinction might bury the *practical impasse* presented by conflicting demands that cannot be simultaneously fulfilled. We have incompatible demands of equal weight bearing on our will with no "grand principle" to break the deadlock. Seen from this angle, the remedy is not to correct an intellectual error, but to acknowledge a humbling *limit of the will*, a limit on the powers of practical reason.[11] A religious perspective demands something like the quietude of worship; and an academic perspective demands something like an exercise of the discursive, loquacious mind. But the latter inherently violates the ambiance of worshipful quiet. The practical agent gets caught in a volitional knot that reason can't untie.

Finally, the blurring of this distinction can be seen as an embarrassing, even shameful or offensive, *violation of taboo*. Worship institutes a taboo against the

11 On Kierkegaard's setting limits to the will through discursive devices, see Chapter Seven above. He remarks that a docent's tendency to explain reasons runs counter to *doing* what is needed. The docent's explanation then becomes "a new calamity." *Papers*, 49, X, 1, A 15.

abstract chatter, disruptive uproar, or mechanical droning of academic discussion. Academic discourse, in turn, institutes a taboo against worshipful attitudes because they short-circuit or damp down readiness to assertively make a case, to be clear, explicit, and "objective" before an audience of rational responders. One's job is not to pray quietly, but to lay out one's cards for all to assess and debate.

Taboo is noticed less in its observance than in its violation. Kierkegaard charges his contemporaries with violating a taboo, and with covering up their violations. *Postscript*, for example, tries to awaken its readers to the violation both of piety and of scholarship when religious institutions adopt the lingo and presumptions of an intellectualist philosophy. The latter may subscribe to the maxim that scholarly truth lies in objective methods of historical inquiry. Religious institutions and persons must subscribe to the counter-maxim that truth lies in cultivating a deep subjective responsibility toward self and the divine.

If worship, or meditation, or respect for the felt-convictions or promptings of a reverent faith should be kept separate from the exercise of a discursive or disquisitional mind, then not to honor this distinctness becomes like the violation of a taboo. Both academics and ecclesiastics can mistake advances in the powers of the discursive intellect with advances in piety, religiosity, or prayerfulness. This trespass of boundaries can become commonplace. Kierkegaard's dialectical authorship aims to bring its readers back to a perspective where the religious and the academic can be seen as distinct, and the violation of their respective regions can be seen both as a comic blunder and as dangerously breaking a taboo.

Taboo

Let me recount a simple anecdote that brings home the problematic wedding of academic and religious aims as one reads the early discourses. The story highlights the presence of taboo wherever the academic and the religious are too closely joined. Imagine reading an undergraduate Princeton honors thesis in philosophy signed off with a simple "Amen." This might be little more than an undergraduate *faux pas*. One mentally erases the offending word to cover up a minor shame. Now imagine that this "Amen" closed out a thesis written by someone who was to become a prominent philosopher. One's impulse to erase might be slowed as one searched for clues to make the closing less jarring.

The thesis is titled "In Demonstration of the Spirit," and the words of St Paul echo in the shadows of some passages: "[I speak not] with enticing words of man's wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."[12] These words echo only implicitly, in the shadows, because when all is said and done, this is a recognizable thesis in *philosophy*, not theology, and presented by the department's outstanding student. It was written in the 1930s by a philosopher who went on to serve for a time

12 1 Corinthians 2:4, RJV. The immediately preceding words are, "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling."

in the 1950s as an assistant professor at Harvard. Even as an undergraduate, Henry Bugbee knew the academic drill, its customs and taboos.[13]

His rationale for the title, and for ending with an ill-prepared "Amen," is weak academically, but strong "existentially" or "religiously." The point of inserting this "passionate utterance," or witness – this simple word that reconfigures our understanding – is to underline a theme, announced in the preface. He says there that his writing all along is not only a scholarly exercise but a spiritual one, through and through. We might read the undergraduate thesis, then, as a kind of sustained prayer or meditation.

The author undertakes his writing as a blessing, a gift, a time of affirmation, wonder, hope and attentiveness. But to honor this religious strand in his work through an explicit "Amen" violates, or at the least severely tests, the standing of a powerful taboo. Philosophical "*demonstrations* of the spirit" must not be mixed with prayer-like "*acclamations* of the spirit." Blurring boundaries in this way creates impurities. Apparently one must choose: *either* the academic *or* the religious. An honors dissertation is clearly an academic undertaking.[14]

Our human practices, moral and religious, political and academic, run smoothly (when they do) thanks to their incorporation of key gestures and distinctions that are constitutive of these practices. In a worshipful setting, if we are participants, we do not snap pictures of the priest performing mass nor, in a classroom setting, do we kneel before professors. An academic thesis ending with "Amen" seems to violate a taboo, for it slows down or inhibits elaboration or critique of the thesis advanced. In this context, it's just out of place, "impure," to engage in "overt" reverential silence and thanksgiving.

Yet life does not always fall simply within prescribed, "self-evident" purity-maintaining boundaries. Any reader of Kierkegaard knows that his writing can embrace a strange mixture of scholarly strands and more affective tremors of personal expectancy, fear and trembling, hope, despair, and thankfulness – attunements to the world that are less characteristic of disciplined academic endeavor than of religious or worshipful undergoings. Part of our fascination with Kierkegaard is his daring both to insist on and simultaneously to challenge or blur distinctions between the religious and the academic, the religious and the ethical, the religious and the aesthetic. His writing inhabits and tills the region of taboo.

If I were an academic advisor at Princeton in the 1930s, I would no doubt have suggested the removal of this offending "Amen" from the closing lines of an otherwise brilliant thesis in philosophy. But if I were a pastor, I might consider leaving it intact. And if I am a pastor and an academic, I could fall into a practical impasse that highlights limits of the rational will. Henry Bugbee's chapters on art

13 See Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning: Philosophical Explorations in Journal Form*, intro. Gabriel Marcel and Edward F. Mooney, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999. Bugbee's writing here can be seen as an extended attempt to write reflectively in a vein religious and philosophical, reflective, meditative, and prayerful.

14 The taboo isn't a matter of failing to honor the familiar "liberal" separation of private from public spheres. Much academic work is done in relative privacy, and prayers can be public crowd-gathering ceremonies.

and religion are thorough and persuasive. They unfold appropriately for academic attention and analysis through their discursive acuity (which seems, in his case, to avoid Jamesean "loquaciousness"). Yet this discursiveness forces another aspect of the writing beneath the horizon of our attention. It forces out of view the aspect tagged by the closing "Amen." By *excising* the quiet, prayerful dimension, we concentrate on the academically discussible topics. We defuse the worry that a taboo has been broken. We forget the closing "Amen."

As I work through the early Kierkegaardian discourses in an academic frame of mind, I no doubt temporarily erase the prayerful, religious quiet they beg to have observed. To honor their religious call would block the effectiveness of my discursive mind. It seems I can't have it both ways. Facing what James would call a "forced option," I must either will to embrace the domain of academic loquaciousness, discussion, and debate, or else will to remain immersed in the mood of worship and prayer that are so central to the discourses. As full-fledged philosophers, religionists, or academics how do we manage both to remember and to forget the quiet of a Kierkegaardian prayer? There must be a third shadowed alternative. And there is. We can enter the dangerous region of taboo, and wrestle with its demons.[15]

Without appearing to violate a taboo, there are wonderful discursive studies that trace thematic resonances among the pseudonymous works and the simultaneously appearing discourses. Other studies trace the specific way Kierkegaard interprets, "reads," the specific Biblical passages that give each discourse its pedagogical launch[16] – though, to be sure, Kierkegaard tells us he is no teacher, implying, perhaps, that the words sound out, arc out, their *own* teaching, for him and for us, wielding power of their own. There have been essays probing the extent to which the early discourses may be more a piece of "indirect communication" than had been supposed, and others that place their meaning biographically in Kierkegaard's struggle to clarify a vocation, somewhere in the mix of allure and aversion among parsonages, siblings, parents, townsfolk, professors, friends, and fellow poets.[17] And there are the later discourses (more properly, deliberations), the series of writings called *Works of Love*, that repay endless scholarly philosophical and theological study, and that bring into play the same dialectical imagination so necessary in responding to *Postscript*, say, or *The Sickness Unto Death*.[18]

But do these successful responses violate what I've called the demand of the discourses for quiet? Struggling for a discursive response to them can feel somewhat

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15 Prayer in the ascetic ancient tradition exemplified by St Anthony is wrestling with demons in (what we could call) the arena of taboo. I thank Clark West for this connection.

16 See, for example, Timothy Polk, *The Biblical Kierkegaard: Reading According to the Rule of Faith*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997.

17 For "indirection" in even the signed works, see Strawser, *Both/And*. For a brilliant intellectual biography, see Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, and Chapter Six above.

18 For a study of the deliberative *Works of Love* (which inherit the style of the early discourses) see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; and Pattison's *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*. Both works weave together *Works of Love* with the "dialectical" writings of Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus.

maladroit – as one might feel exiting a cathedral overcome with grief, only to be asked by a TV news reporter for a critical comment on the service within.

Modes of Silence

I've argued that the discourses can be responded to discursively, but are designed to play a non-discursive role as well, the role of quieting academic discursiveness. This role has been underappreciated (naturally) by academics. It deserves increased appreciation. We can learn the physics of gothic architectural wonders, and still confess the relevance of the service held within, and perhaps the personal need to let ourselves be absorbed in its ambiance. This would be to let the cathedral trigger, invite, and enhance all manner of worshipful, prayerful response – quite apart from the physics of the place. The early discourses can both excite and damp down the loquacious academic mind. Approached as sermon-like deliverances, they can't help but still the inquisitive or disputatious mind.

A related point is this. The sort of quiet that the discourses instill is an experiential mood of reverence or humility rather that a discursive *category of*, or *claim about*, quiet or humility. Silence is an important "dialectical category" in Kierkegaard's authorship, but it would be a mistake to link the experiential silence instilled by the early discourses with "silence" as a topic or category of investigation in other parts of the authorship.

Even if one were to think of "silence" as a pervasive Kierkegaardian theme, one would have to distinguish an array of differences that are most likely too varied to yield to a single, all-purpose account. The "quieting" of the early discourses is not Kierkegaard (or his pseudonyms) wrestling with the silence-producing "offense" of the crucifixion, nor is it Abraham's silence toward Sarah and Isaac, nor the breathless silence of exasperation and puzzlement at the three-page testament at the end of *Postscript* averring that the book's arguments are not the writer's own. Nor should discourse-instilled silence be assimilated to the silence of Mary in the presence of Jesus and Martha, or the silence of the "sinful" woman attending Jesus, each discussed by Kierkegaard. Nor is it the silence Kierkegaard may seem to want of women *generally* – as if voiceless women were preferred to disquisitional ones, Christianly speaking.[19]

My main point, however, is not that Kierkegaard has many sorts of silence at work in the authorship, each dependent on local context for its specific meaning. All this is true, yet the larger point is quite different. Despite this fact of differences in the sorts of silence Kierkegaard takes up topically, or aims to effect rhetorically in his readers, another major fault line remains to be mapped. This is the fault line between the quiet that the early discourses aim to instill, and the many sorts of silence discursively elaborated (and non-discursively effected) elsewhere in Kierkegaard's authorship.

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19 See Wanda Warren Berry's discussion of modes of speech and silence in "The Silent Woman in Kierkegaard's Later Religious Writing," in Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, eds, *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1997; and my account of Abraham's silence in *Knights of Faith and Resignation.*

There is, to my ear, a culminating quiet in these early discourses that is unique in the authorship. It seems to be a *dominating* effect. There is a special extra-discursive and powerful *imposition* of a silence specific to them. The effect is to humble or override an impulse to discuss or interrogate. Kierkegaard directs us to read these discourses aloud. Silence, it seems, is enacted and undergone *through* the enunciation and absorption of spoken or written words. To be caught up by the worshipful or prayerful imposition of such silence is not to discuss, or to be readied to discuss, anything at all – least of all, the silence so enacted. Words that still the soul make no claim *about* silence. And with no discursive claim on the table, there is nothing to discuss, nothing to be answered, countered, or clarified.

This silence seems to differ in quality and degree from other moments of Kierkegaardian silence. The categories and even enactments of silence in the *Postscript*, or in *Either/Or*, or in *Fear and Trembling* cry out almost immediately for philosophical and exegetical exploration. There are local passages in the discourses, to be sure, that invite discursive exploration. But if their dominant effect is the installation of the quiet of prayer, then we've entered different territory. We're led to undergo the experience of silence, the very silence of "silence," in a dramatically sustained and thoroughgoing way. It becomes something raw and primitive in its inescapable imposition – like rolling Midwest thunder claps. Discussion, if it enters the picture at all, comes sometime and place down the line. Worship, like thunder, stills the clamorous soul.

Full-fledged Sermons?

Here we can enter some serious qualifications to a full assimilation of the discourses to a sermonic setting, a context of worship. First, Kierkegaard delivers up these "sermons" to a publisher, to be transformed into jacketed books to be read out of church by the Danish book-reading public and cultural elites. Second, he admits no authority to preach them, and third, although he urges us to read these discourses aloud, he fails to specify the audience to be addressed. Can we coherently preach to ourselves? Or are we surreptitiously allowing Kierkegaard to violate his own reticence by having *him* preach to us – indirectly, surreptitiously – as we read? Furthermore, he wants to be remembered as a writer, not as a preacher. This is true generally of Kierkegaard, and the point carries over explicitly to the discourses. They have prefaces and dedications whose tone and content place them as pieces of literature – modeled on sermons, but framed non-sermonically. And they are surely to be read as part of a much larger literary-spiritual production, most of which makes no pretense at being worshipful. Last, it is not beyond his cunning for Kierkegaard to "try on" the speech and ambiance of Christian worship, in particular its sermonic segments, with less than full commitment to their force as vehicles of worship.

Kierkegaard might use his rhetorical skills just to display his "postmodern" talent for decentering the writing self. More likely, he blocks direct access to his authorial intent because his commitment lies less in producing exemplary sermons than in underlining the fundamental gap between honest, authentic worship and its shallow simulacra. He is dedicated to establishing a contrast between the authentic and the

counterfeit throughout the authorship. And he adopts the strategy of complicating access to his intent to achieve his end. He adopts the strategy of "trying on" a mode of audience-address with less than full commitment to it. He "tries on" the ambiance of a dialectical mock-Hegelian disquisition in *Postscript*, or "tries on" the ambiance of a traditional academic dissertation in *Concept of Irony*, or "tries on" the ambiance of a seductive literary tale of adventure and betrayal in *Either/Or I.* For that matter, he famously "tries on" a spectacular, dramatic re-enactment of the trial of Abraham.[20] In the following section, I'll say more about his interest in this task of bringing out the sham he finds about him. For the moment, it's enough to say that "trying on" the ambiance of worship, if that's what we have before us in these early discourses, entails a "hedged" commitment on Kierkegaard's part. The upshot is that his commitment to the discourses as vehicles of worship is less than simple or straightforward, even though he surely means them to be imitations, or models of such vehicles.

Kierkegaard no doubt relishes the scholarly inquisitiveness these discourses will provoke. We are forced to objectively, discursively, plot the location of these "quasi-sermons" within a non-sermonic authorship, and simultaneously to acknowledge their silence-instilling, subjectivity-enhancing force. The trick is to embrace this tension – to let ourselves be captives of a Kierkegaard-induced "double vision," something like an irony that we are meant neither to evade nor to damp down.[21] This means *angst* in knowing that we violate a taboo, whichever way we turn.

Felt-conviction and Content

What sort of experience or felt-conviction is brought to light through the quiet-instilling force of these discourses? What experiential "contents" are allowed to well up or to be wrought in this ambiance? The ambiance is already one of reverence, prayer, and worship, as we've seen, and has for its more specific content the meanings, experiences, and felt-convictions native to a Christian's faith, a kind of Lutheran faith, as Kierkegaard and his readership would understand it. More generally, the "content" of this engendered space of worship will include suffering anxiety and freedom as one absorbs, as best one can, the full dimensions of this space. And as we've seen, it will include a sense of inhabiting a region of taboo as one oscillates between academic and religious uptake and response; between being tempted to engage the discursive mind and letting non-discursive quiet prevail; between falling victim to the aesthetic spectacle all about (social, architectural, musical, discursive, and otherwise) and dropping more appropriately into honest prayer.

Assuming one finds oneself for the moment in a space of relatively unmixed piety, the discourses open a space of possibility for any number of Christian virtues to resonate, speak, as we are readied to hear. It will be a space given over to

20 "The spectacular" in *Fear and Trembling* is contrasted with "the religious" in Chapter Eight above.

21 See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Nagel argues that we must live with "double vision" in philosophy, a condition created by the irresolvable conflict between "subjective" and "objective" standpoints.

meditations and resolves on trust, hope, charity, generosity of spirit, mercy, as these await infusion and nourishment in a faith-life. For academics and other part-time warriors, this space of quietude harbors humility – the candid recognition of our limits in projects of mastery of the world, others, or the self. Patience and renewal have space to thrive. This is the quiet space of "upbuilding," or "edification," that the discourses work to clear. It is a space not just for faith's platitudes, but a place where virtue can take hold and enter the fabric of a life. Content, as well as quietude, is instilled.

William James pleads for the importance of "felt-convictions" and "intuition" for a person's religious identity. Such convictions or "gut feelings" remain at risk in a culture dedicated to the projects of self-assertion and control through the tools of rationalized technology, bureaucracy, and "free-market" competition and its supportive, well-fueled ideology of consumerism. "Felt-conviction" should be discredited when it slides toward zealotry, or erupts in violence. It is equally discredited when it slides toward "mere preference," or "subjective choice," and thus falls outside the pale of worthy discussion. Thus we are left in a region of "taboo" between loquaciousness and "dumb intuition." To live as religiously thoughtful academics we must cultivate languages and ways of speaking and attunement that can retrieve the importance of what all too easily gets assimilated into the disrepute of mere "felt-conviction" or "dumb intuition" or the disrepute of empty loquacity.

Kierkegaard harnessed his own abundant discursive gifts in the interest of "felt-conviction" and the subtle, even silent, appeals of reverence, worship, and prayer. He indulged his great talent for words as an inoculation against using words in an exclusively "loquacious" way. As William James put it, one must struggle to defend "dumb intuition" against excessive academic intellectualism: "If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits."[22] As he sees it, the detached academic impulse has "more prestige" than felt-conviction because "it has the loquacity" which (he says bluntly) "can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words."[23]

In a Kierkegaardian perspective, the region of faith is the non-loquacious region of "felt-conviction," and the latter must defend itself "without words."[24] In *Either/Or*, he gives us a taste of the excesses of aestheticism. He hopes, thereby, to undercut its allure. In *Postscript*, he gives us a taste of dialectical acrobatics, thereby undermining its allure. In the present case, he gives us what I take to be a positive taste of worship, prayer, and reverence. Being "the real thing," this might undermine any appeal that shallow counterfeits might harbor. The premise is that the Copenhagen church-going fashion of "see and be seen," of sociable loquacity, is counterfeit. Churchly aestheticism is reinforced through rituals of mutual congratulation among a self-important congregation. Add a refined hauteur among its priests, and you have not earnestness, but refined illusion.

There's a risk that in the course of writing about the power of these talks to quiet, and so allow a space for spirit, we break the silences they would instill, and so fail to

22 See Taylor, *Varieties*, p. 52.

23 Ibid.

24 Of course, ironically, words remain Kierkegaard's métier throughout.

respond as they call us to. Submitting to their calls to prayer means setting writing to one side. We remain academics, naturally, and so we talk *about* the discourses and their intended effects even as we insist that to hear them is to let the academic mind be stilled. We remain fascinated onlookers, not worshipers, as we write of Kierkegaard's desire that we drop the scholar's stance. The point remains worth making. While we are trained as academics in philosophy or religion or theology, and trained to respond to a text's dominant discursive drive, the early discourses, in their piety, subvert the academic listening we've been trained to exercise. Consider how immersion in prayer, music, or scripture evades the bustle of a discursive mind.

Prayer, Music, Scripture

Imagine a prayer delivered by a pastor to a congregation. It's meant to build up a spiritual mood or passion or feeling that might alter or infuse the heart.[25] Those joining in the prayer may "follow along" with the words, letting themselves be swept up in its arc of significance. Being so swept up might be an essential phase in upbuilding of spirit. Of course, as we've noted, discourse prayers are not exactly prayers. They're framed by literary introductions that locate a reader *outside* the space of worship. Be that as it may, the prayer and subsequent body of the discourse are surely meant to model, if not fully replicate, prayerful worshipful attention. A prayer is not the first ploy in a conversational exchange, and however dialectically provocative a sermon can be, its ambiance is worship, not an academic debate. We save our objections and commentary for talk outside the chapel door.

If prayer is addressed to "Our Father," we are expected to present a petition or a word of thanks or acclamation in a manner that is not declamatory, insistent or peevish – however urgent the plea or heart-felt the gratitude. When another speaks a prayer, we submit or surrender to the tenor of these words' appeal, diminishing as best we can, our critical distance from them, and maximizing, as best we can, our immersion in them. At best they are words that flow from our passional (as opposed to our loquacious) self – a self whose most prominent desire is to join the concerted appeal of speaker, listeners, and words, and then to await whatever response might be divinely granted. Reverence and respect quiet the will. They give us a stance opposite to a readiness for riposte, objection, or hermeneutical paraphrase.[26] Insofar as our writing or thinking is immersed in the world of prayer or worship, our distinctively academic capacities for discursive response are shut down or challenged. Our ability to take hold of an object or topic to "make sense of it" are set aside (if only temporarily). Prayer invites us to release *our* control on words or topics, allowing words to take the course initiated by another, or even allowing words to sound "on their own."

Like prayer, music too invites us to deactivate or quiet an academic, disquisitional response. It typically suspends or stalls our impulse to "get a word in edgeways" or otherwise raise objections or arguments in response to what we have heard. Of

25 I come at prayer from a slightly different angle in "Becoming What We Pray: Passion's Gentler Resolutions."

26 On quieting the will, see Chapters Seven and Twelve above.

course, texts or verse can be set to music in hymns, chants, or arias. Nevertheless, an oration delivered musically – an oratorio – is not just another speech. The "book" of an opera, and its theatrical realization, become full opera only with the successful incorporation of music. The recently commissioned opera *Dead Man Walking* grips us through its discursive elements: in this case, the death penalty is under scrutiny. However, a difference remains between the opera, on the one hand, and the movie or the book, on the other. The opera's script is supplemented by a musical score, by the non-discursive demands of orchestration, vocal delivery, pitch, timbre, rhythm, and other purely musical factors. One might find the music of the opera unsurpassed while finding the opera's discursive "script" and stage realization quite shallow or objectionable.

Music scored apart from associated verse or text can seem discursive. The "statements" or "subjects" of a Bach fugue interweave in conversation. "Descriptive" or "programmatic" music can seem to "paint a picture" that activates discursive minds. But a response to music requires more. It must open the soul to tones to which we can give ourselves non-discursively. When music becomes the focus of discursive debate, its special wordless power to gather listeners and singers is for the moment set aside. When debate about *music* gets too heated, we know that music's capacity to instill a reverent, or joyful, or grief-filled mood is forgotten. It becomes relegated to an onlooker's object of contention.[27]

From the standpoint of academic philosophical or theological endeavor, we *want* animated constructive or deflationary discussion. Yet it would be a scandal to have such animated combat run headlong after the cadence of a prayer, or hymn, or benediction. The painter Barnett Newman is said to have quipped, at the expense of art critics, that criticism or aesthetics is to painting as ornithology is to birds.[28] We can imagine the Kierkegaardian transposition. Discourse *about* worship is to worship as ornithology is to birds. And what Kierkegaard wants to deliver, if not worship itself, is awareness of the difference between its authentic shape, on the one hand, and on the other, loquacious conversations *about* it. Quite ironically (or comically), in the present age it takes all-too-many words to make the point!

The first of Kierkegaard's eighteen collected discourses, "Expectancy," welcomes in the new year with a passage from scripture. It builds hope as music or prayer might, not by announcing a simple proposition to debate, but by calling on words whose power resides deep in traditions of hope and expectancy, that have spoken continually through the ages, and now arc toward us. Scripture attains a life of its own, to which each generation is invited to participate. This attunement to past words arcing through our present, moving us, is as far as can be from attunement to a newsprint op-ed piece.

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27 Henry Bugbee has an amazing discussion of music and prayer in his "The Sense and Conception of Being," PhD Dissertation, University of California, 1947, pp. 154–6. Thanks to Clark West for calling this to my attention.

28 Newman's quip as it bears on the contrast between moral responsiveness and moral theory *about* responsiveness is discussed in Michael Stocker, *Valuing Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Why should a mood of prayerful attending, in the ambiance of music and scripture, be any part of spiritual growth? Well, forming spirit might require downsizing presumptions of grandeur, self-importance, or self-sufficiency. To kneel or sit quietly in worship is to forego an attitude of dominance over others or one's situation. Even petitionary prayer is neither demanding nor commanding, but supplication. A discourse does not position readers to enter a polemical give and take, but rather, positions them to enter a space of *patience* – of expectancy, listening, waiting. Reverence requires abrogation of dominance or mastery, inviting stillness as an essential phase of spiritual growth. Giving up *our* turn to speak creates the space where another can speak to and through us through scripture or sermons, in hymns or prayer.

A discourse opening with prayer privileges receptivity over self-assertion. Its scriptural quotation privileges authoritative words of a distant place and time over words of our own "invention." This reminds us that we do not just wield language as we will, but inherit its authority and power, which arcs mysteriously from time past. Scripture is not a set of dead letters or a string of voiced sounds we use to get around. In fact, it's vibrant, powerful sentences and words that carry us through endless overlapping, ever-opening worlds. As great music does, it lets us sing. Words that still, words of worship or prayer or meditation – sermonic discourse passages – make space for us to live in words that are not first our own but may become our own, as the life of our world is its words.

We've considered the sermonic setting and the mood of worship as constitutive of the space the discourses occupy, and we've opened lines of sight on that space, a space for prayer, for virtues such as patience and humility, for the music of verse and hymn. Lastly, we can open what I'll call a pervasive line of mystery.

Preserving Mystery

The early discourses quiet us by recalling us to what I rather awkwardly call the alluring and repelling *mystery* of existence, which first and foremost defies our self-importance, cognitively and volitionally. It comes through the music of worship, the majesty of vaulted ceilings, or the wonder of sacraments enacted at communion rails. It comes in the sight of scudding clouds or geese in silhouette against a city sky. It arrives in words at cross-purposes and in repetitions of meanings that help embed them, in words a writer can play out in rhythmic phrases of arresting power.

Here we encounter paradoxical juxtapositions: a strength that is weakness, a hope that is madness, a pain buoyed by delight, a Lord concerned with the least sparrow's fall, a flower amidst offal, the Lord's giving and taking quite beyond any measure of justice, a child always already loved. These are registered not as intellectual scandals or dialectical enigmas (though that's how they appear outside the context of the discourses). What are taunting conundra for the dialectical mind become sustaining wonders for the religious soul.

These tensed and otherwise troubling juxtapositions of the Kierkegaardian authorship slip by in a melancholy, wistful, or contemplative way in the discourses,

while in *Fear and Trembling*, say, these oppositions strike a hammer blow. These tensed factors in a reflective and affective life are reminders of fields of inexhaustible significance. They're fields we precariously and faithfully inhabit, abide as our abode. It's an ambiance of untamable humanity and divinity and perhaps it's sealed in an indifferent reserve, even as streams of care remain. Encased lyrically, as it were, these striking formulations lay the background for a heartening reminder. Such inexhaustible mystery vouchsafes the inexhaustible horizons of our hope and delight – whatever the descending dark. We live in hopeful possibility, which must indeed seem something of a mystery from the standpoint of one taking stock from a stance of utter mastery or control. Yet in ways akin to prayer or scripture, hope opens to the mystery of things as animating, grounding power.

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Index

Søren Kierkegaard is referred to as SK, except for his own main entry.

"A" 5fn4, 8, 117
  Judge Wilhelm, contest 118, 120, 122-5
    reader's intervention 125-7
Abraham 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 66fn5, 69, 118, 158, 163
  dilemma 102-4
  faith 104
  in *Fear and Trembling* 138, 139-40, 142, 144-56
  humbling of 120
  Isaac, near-sacrifice 101, 197, 198
  in *Repetition* 171-2
  SK on 66-7
  see also Isaac
abstraction 5, 25, 30, 40, 44fn16, 48, 55, 73, 75-8, 81, 83, 128, 165, 169, 194, 201, 227, 232-3
the absurd 30-2, 40, 48, 112-3, 120, 170-2, 224
Agamemnon 142
Ahbel-Rappe, Sara, *A Companion to Socrates* (co-editor) 26fn12
Alcibiades 21, 23, 24, 25, 59, 84, 207
Allison, Henry, 'Christianity and Nonsense' 218fn3
Altham, J.E.J. (co-editor), *World, Mind, and Ethics* 11fn14
Ameriks, Karl, *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* 108fn4
answerability 183, 185, 186, 188
Anti-Climacus 5fn4, 11, 32, 78fn28, 118
aphorisms 66
Apocalypse 197fn42
appropriation 10fn12, 109
Aristophanes 22, 23
Aristotle, Aristotelian 122, 127-8, 157, 167fn44, 193-5
Asclepius 19, 42
Athens, in Christendom 40
atonement, repetition as 170
attunement
  in *Fear and Trembling* 139, 142, 144, 145-6, 149, 151, 198
  in *Postscript* 217-21
Augenblick see Øieblikket
Aumann, Anthony, 'Kierkegaard and the Need for Indirect Communication' 210fn16
author, identification 39
authority, transfer to reader 183, 189, 190, 206, 213, 217, 223, 237

Barrett, Lee, 'Subjectivity is (Un)Truth' 220fn5
becoming, and the ethical sublime 188-9, 193
beginnings
  fables 145-6
  stories 155-6
Beiser, Frederick C., The Cambridge Companion to Hegel 161fn18
belief, communication of 209-10
Benson, B.E., The Phenomenology of Prayer (co-editor) 12fn16
Bernstein, J.M., The Fate of Art 171fn66
Berry, Wanda Warren, 'The Silent Woman' 236
birth 6, 39, 41, 42, 46, 77-8, 85, 94, 107, 132, 155, 165, 168, 194-9, 212
Bloom, Harold 91
Book of Job 57, 64, 94, 157
books, Kafka on 137
Brandon, Robert, Mighty Dead 37fn1, 54
Bugbee, Henry 78fn24, 82, 83, 234, 241fn27
  on wisdom 93-4
  works
    The Inward Morning 78fn24, 94fn12, 234fn13

'The Sense and Conception of Being' 241fn27

Cain, David, on repetition 158fn5
Camus, Albert, *The Stranger* 61
Cappelhørn, Niels
Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998 (co-editor) 120fn8, 149fn42
Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2001 (co-editor) 137fn2
Caputo, John D. 28fn18, 109fn5
Against Ethics 95fn14
'Kierkegaard, Heidegger' 167fn44
Cave, Plato's 18, 22
Cavell, Stanley 26fn11, 59fn40, 66, 67-71, 74, 76, 81-2, 91, 94fn13, 97, 177, 192-4, 218
on Faust 181fn11
on love of the world 97
on next self 177, 188
on passionate utterance 52-3, 56, 71
on perfectionism 74, 192-4
on subjectivity 219fn4
on Thoreau 42fn13
on words 66fn5, 81
works
Cities of Words 193fn33
'Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy' 218fn2, 219fn4
Philosophical Passages 66fn5
The Senses of Walden 69fn9
certitude 111
and contact 77, 82, 84, 97, 139
Christ 5
as exemplar 193
imaginary return 32
vs Socrates, in SK's thought 49-51
see also collaborative identity
Christendom 15, 55
Athens in 40
Danish 26
cognitive humility, Kantian 120, 224, 225, 226
cognitive success 184
collaborative identity 28, 31, 46-9, 192
communication
of a belief 209-10
direct/indirect 202, 203-4, 205, 206-9, 211
Conant, James, 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense' 219fn4
consciousness, repetition as 168
Constantius , Constantine 5fn5, 39, 112, 157
on mediation 161
name as repetition 160
on repetition 160-1, 162-3, 165-6
contact 61-7, 77, 81-5, 93-4, 97, 183, 201, 213-4, 225-6
and certitude 77, 82, 84, 97, 139
and knowledge 82, 83-4, 93
and unknowing 81
see also intimacy
Copenhagen, SK's critique 158-9
creation 197fn42, 199
Critchley, Simon 71
Things Merely Are 74fn17
Crites, Stephen, 'The Blissful Security of the Moment' 162fn22, 168fn54, 170fn64
'crumbs' 179
vs 'fragments' 39fn5
curiosity 57, 130, 162-4, 204

Dasein concept 69, 109, 210
Davenport, John J. 129fn19, 130fn22
Kierkegaard after McIntyre (co-editor) 100fn23, 117fn2, 119fn5
'What Kierkegaard Adds to Alterity Ethics' 103fn26
David 11fn13
Dead Man Walking (opera) 241
death 16, 17, 18, 24, 25, 41-45, 55, 57, 58, 65, 73, 79, 111-13, 188, 194-199, 212, 224
and ethics 195
and *Øieblikket* 111
Deer Park, Copenhagen 141fn14-15
definitions, revision of 27
Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death* 103fn26
Descartes, René 38
despair 5, 7, 10, 56, 61, 110, 112, 119, 122-3, 153, 156, 164, 167, 171, 204, 214, 234
and faith 16
Deuser, Herman
Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998 (co-editor) 120fn8, 149fn42

Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2001 (co-editor) 137fn2
dialogue 43, 45-6, 50, 55, 62, 64, 69, 71, 74, 79, 80-1, 85, 114, 120-2, 124-5, 127, 194,
Platonic 13, 21-2
Dickinson, Emily, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 67fn6, 93fn11
Diotima 13, 18, 19, 22-5, 42, 45, 55, 56, 58, 59, 76, 81, 226
speech 18, 44
story 24, 25
discourse
academic vs prayerful 232-6
responses to 236
doctrine, 16, 25, 38, 40, 45, 47, 54-9, 75, 77, 82, 155, 166, 172-3, 180, 201-5, 211-12, 222-6
dogma 12, 54, 59, 167-72
Don Giovanni 4, 159
Don Juan 3, 4
Don Quixote 3, 8
Dostoevsky, Fyodor
The Brothers Karamazov 32
Grand Inquisitor 32, 211
Underground Man 62

Eliot, T.S. 230
Emerson, Ralph Waldo 66, 193
enactment 50, 110, 115, 156, 181, 226, 237-8
The Enlightenment 62, 223
Eremita, Victor 5, 39
Eriksen, Niels, *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition* 107fn1, 112fn11
eros 18
and knowledge 82, 83
Socratic 45
estrangement 61, 72, 80
eternity 86, 107, 114, 161, 167, 173
as true repetition 170
the ethical sublime 102, 154fn53, 178, 191, 197-8, 199, 224
and becoming 188-9, 193
examples 197fn42
ethics
of becoming 177, 193
dangers 194-6
and death 195
suspension 177
varieties 178fn3, 192-4
exemplars 15, 16, 30, 193, 215fn31
Abraham 211
Christ 193
Faust 193
moral 130
role 193fn34, 194, 201-2, 211-12
and self-independence 211-12, 214
Socratic 37-8, 211
and subjectivity, activation of 212-13
of truth 211

fables 3, 4-5, 111
beginnings 145-6
Princess Ingeborg 110
'the fable of the man' 144fn31, 146, 149fn41, 151, 153
faith
Abraham's 104
and despair 16
in *Fear and Trembling* 139, 140, 148-50
fashion 75, 145, 161, 231
Hegelian 74
Faust 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 69, 142, 180-1, 191, 224
anti-Faust 181, 226
as exemplar 193
'felt-conviction', vs intellectualism 239
Fitzgerald, Robert, on religion 41
Forster, Michael, 'Hegel's Dialectic Method' 161fn18
Fowles, John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (film) 108-10
'fragments', vs 'crumbs' 39fn5
Frankfurt, Harry, *The Importance of What We Care About* 168fn53
Frederiksberg Gardens 144
freedom 57
self as 167-8
task for, repetition as 167-8
Freud, Sigmund 54, 90-91, 100, 119
Friedlander, Paul, *Plato: An Introduction* 18
Fuimara, Gemma Corradi 174
Furtak, Rick 7, 44, 85, 93fn11, 115fn18, 191fn31, 198fn43
'Skepticism and Perceptual Faith' 93fn11
Wisdom in Love 7fn8, 44, 115fn18, 191fn31

Garff, Joakim
'Johannes de Silentio' 146fn35
Søren Kierkegaard 91fn8
mistrustful approach 91-2, 101-2, 104-5
sexual incidents 104-5
trusting approach 92-3
Geertz, Clifford 77
glance *see Øieblikket*
God, struggle with Himself 103fn25
Goddard, Harold, on Hamlet 56-7
good life
moods 7, 9, 55, 72, 198, 203, 208
passions 43, 55-7, 59, 63, 73, 77-8, 121, 124, 133, 139, 149, 169, 194, 198, 203-4, 207-8, 210, 214, 218, 220, 225, 231
virtues, strengths 7, 17-8, 55fn33, 63, 113, 127, 128-31, 177-8, 182, 184, 187, 193-4, 198, 203, 208, 214, 238, 242
Goodman, Russell, *Contending with Cavell* 219fn4
Green, Ronald M., *Kierkegaard and Kant* 166fn42
guilt-consciousness 48
Gyges' Ring 18

Habbard, Anne-Christine, 'Time and Testimony' 185fn20
Hadot, Pierre, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 7fn8
Hamlet 51, 52, 56-7, 73fn15, 75, 82, 84-5, 99, 100, 131, 180, 185, 195-6, 224
Goddard on 56-7
Hampshire, Stuart, *Morality and Pessimism* 178fn3
Hannay, Alastair 31, 95, 108fn3, 144, 156, 159fn10, 166, 178, 179, 180, 181fn12, 187, 219, 222,
Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard (co-editor) 180fn7
Kierkegaard: A Biography 3fn1, 31fn21, 91fn8, 178fn1, 179fn5, 222fn9
Kierkegaard: The Arguments of the Philosophers 95fn15
Kierkegaard and Philosophy 135fn31, 156fn58
"The 'Impossibilities' of Repetition" 166fn43
Harrison, Ross, *World, Mind, and Ethics* (co-editor) 11fn14
Hegel, Georg, Hegelianism 19, 32fn22, 33, 43, 49, 53, 72-4, 113-4, 118, 119, 145fn32, 154, 160fn16, 161, 167fn44, 168fn54, 178fn3, 192, 213, 218-9, 221, 238,
Phenomenology of Spirit 113
Heidegger, Martin10, 37, 52, 54, 68, 69, 101, 109fn5, 182, 210, 227
Dasein concept 69, 109, 210
on language 68
Heraclitus 11
hermeneutics, approaches 94-5
to SK 96-106
hermeneutics of love 90, 92-3, 104
hermeneutics of suspicion 90-1, 91-2, 101
and unmasking 100-1
H.H. 5fn4
Hilarius Bookbinder 5fn4, 98-9
Hocking, W.E. 39, 133
Houe, Paul
'Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View' 26fn12
Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s) 26fn12
Howland, Jacob 51
Kierkegaard and Socrates 26fn12, 30fn20, 51fn28
human being, definition problems 39
humankind, Sophocles on 41
humility 16, 31, 82, 113, 129, 178, 199, 231, 236, 239, 242
cognitive 120, 224, 225, 226
volitional 120
humor 31
Postscript 221, 222
humorist, Johannes de silentio 179

identity 27-60, 98-102, 133, 139, 150, 155-6, 168, 192, 196, 207, 209, 213, 215, 239; *see also* collaborative identity
imagination 6, 23, 39, 53, 56, 73, 80, 108, 109, 113, 114, 125fn15, 149, 155, 173, 181, 182, 185, 187, 195-8, 196, 212, 235
indirection *see* communication, direct/indirect
Ingeborg, Princess, fable 110
Inter et Inter 5fn4

intimacy 11, 17, 23, 24, 61-6, 69-86, 93-4, 114fn15, 183, 186, 189, 194-5, 202-3, 211, 213-4, 227-9
inwardness 45, 61, 62, 64, 126, 129, 137-8, 205, 206-9, 211-12, 219
Isaac 8, 10, 64, 138, 152, 101-4, 112, 138, 147, 151-3, 157, 160, 162-3, 168, 171-3, 177, 197-8, 236; *see also* Abraham

Jacob 77
James, William 228, 232, 235, 239
Janik, Allan, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (co-author) 39fn6
Janouch, Gustav, *Conversations with Kafka* 137fn2
Job 100fn22, 105, 157, 158, 162, 163, 164-5, 171
Johannes Climacus 5, 11, 29, 30, 31, 34, 47, 63-4, 76, 80, 100, 110, 111, 118, 137, 139
  midwife 223
  Postscript, revocation 217-18, 219-23, 224, 225-6
Johannes de silentio 5, 21, 24, 44, 85, 100, 138, 145, 160, 164, 165, 201
  as carnival pitch man 143
  contrasting roles 142-3, 144
  as humorist 179
John the Climber *see* Johannes Climacus
Joyce, James, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 183fn16
Judge Wilhelm 4, 5fn4, 8, 23, 30, 117
  and 'A', contest 118-19, 120, 122-5, 159

Kafka, Franz 189
  on books 137
Kant, Kantian 40, 52, 75-7, 81, 96-7, 118fn3, 120, 125, 129, 160, 166, 169, 171, 178fn3, 185, 188, 192-6, 201, 218, 223-6
Kamtekar, Rachana, *A Companion to Socrates* (co-editor) 26fn12
Kearney, Richard, *On Paul Ricoeur* 90fn4
Kierkegaard, Søren
  on Abraham 66-7
  anti-didacticism 38
  approaches to 8-9
  broken engagement 101-2
    Abraham's dilemma, parallel 104
    charitable view 102
  Christianly actions 28-9
  doctoral dissertation 26
  hermeneutical approach 96-106
  images of 95-6
  impact 37
  as Mephistopheles 95
  non-Christianity 27-8, 34-5, 40, 60
  overview 8
  polemics 35, 70, 72, 191
  procedures 118
  reading, self-examination 6, 10, 11
  on repetition 167-72
  as saint 95
  as Satan 95, 96
  self, search for 6-8
  sketches experiments 3-11
  as Socrates 95, 96-7
  Socratic approach 8, 12
  Socratic influence 6, 8, 13, 19
  Socratic task 8
  thought, packaging 38-9
  truth, approaches to 134
  university training 75-6
  works
    Attack on Christendom 117, 158
    Concept of Anxiety 10, 48, 64, 75, 107fn1, 109
    Concept of Dread 107fn1
    Concept of Irony 26, 46, 141-2
    Discourses 8, 40, 46, 65
    Early Polemical Writings 222fn9
    Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses 157fn2
      attunement 231
      'Expectancy' 241
      reflective space 238-40, 242-3
      response, varieties of 231-2
      as sermons 229-30, 237-8
      silence-inducing effects 229, 230, 232
    Either/Or 4, 5, 8, 11fn13, 39, 48, 64, 122-3
      MacIntyre's reading 117-18, 120-2
        critiques 119
      moral dialogue 122-5
      repetition in 159
      'The Seducer's Diary' 4, 39, 110
    Fear and Trembling 4-5, 8, 10, 21, 25fn8, 46, 49, 67, 70, 101, 104, 137-56

Attunement 139, 142, 144, 145-6, 149, 151, 198
fable of the man 146-52
faith 139, 140, 148-50
horror in 138
identities 156
irony 139
moral of 154fn54
motive for 154fn54
pathos 139, 140
Preface 145
repetition 160
as spiritual peep-show 142
Tivoli parallels 142, 154
tone 137, 138, 140, 145-6
For Self-Examination 158fn8
Four Upbuilding Discourses 157fn2
From the Papers of One Still Living 222fn9
'Job Discourse' 157fn2, 158, 228
Journals and Papers 166
Literary Review 43fn14, 46, 70, 117
The Moment and Late Writings 8, 27
Papers and Journals 3 fn1, 6, 7fn9, 12fn16, 22fn5
Philosophical Crumbs/Fragments 13, 28, 38, 75, 101, 111
Point of View 29, 47, 49, 144fn29
Postscript 5, 12fn16, 26, 33, 38, 44, 45, 46, 47, 64, 70, 75, 76, 90fn3, 101, 137, 177-99, 201-15, 217-26
alternate translations 31, 179, 221
attunement 217-21
Climacus' interventions 187-8
Hegel parody 221
humor 221, 222
non-conclusion 126
as nonsense 218-20
revocation 217-18, 219-23, 224, 225-6
subtitles 179-80
Practice in Christianity 46
Prefaces 39
Repetition 8, 64, 112, 157-74, 228
as *roman à clef* 158
young man 8, 164-5, 171
Sickness Unto Death 5, 28, 32fn23, 48, 119, 120
Soap Cellars 101
Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer, 3fn1, 157fn3
Stages on Life's Way 5, 48, 99, 111
'Strengthening in the Inner Being' 147
Works of Love 40, 44, 46, 89fn2, 192
Writing Sampler 141
see also pseudonyms
kinesis 157
Kirmmse, Bruce 35-6
knight of faith 139-40, 144fn29, 146fn35, 164, 165, 168fn49, 173, 213fn27, 224fn14
knowledge 57, 58
beyond 225
and contact 82, 83-4, 93
and eros 82
impersonal 82-3
indeterminate 81-2
local 77
and love 78fn25, 83, 106
non-local 77fn23
Pattison on 82-3
propositional 17, 18, 23, 50, 77, 81, 83, 85, 135, 181, 201-4, 214-15, 226, 228, 241
as recollection 13
renunciation 224
taxonomy of 93-4
see also contact; intimacy; self-knowledge; Socratic knowledge; subjectivity
Krishek, Sharon, 'The Infinite Love of the Finite' 14fn18

language, Heidegger on 68
Larmore, Charles
'Holderlin and Novalis' 108fn4
The Romantic Legacy 108fn4
Lear, Jonathan 15
learning
excess 75-6
and listening 131
love in 72-3

Léon, Céline, Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard (co-editor) 236fn19
Lessing, Gotthold, and subjectivity 183
Lippitt, John, Humour and Irony 193fn34, 221fn7
listening 14, 130, 172, 174, 189, 207, 224, 225, 227, 240-2,
  and learning 131
loquacity, sociable 239
love 57, 114fn15, 130, 132, 153, 155, 157, 160, 178, 197, 202, 225
  hermeneutics *see* hermeneutics of love
  and knowledge 78fn25, 83, 106
  in learning 72-3
  and lost love 10, 157
  as passionate utterances 66
  reading for 89
  Socrates in 22, 82
  Socrates on 18, 22, 56, 65
  of truth 44
  unrequited 8, 111, 164-5
  see also eros, Diotima, intimacy
Lowrie, Walter 158

MacIntyre, Alasdair
  polarity technique 118
  works
    A Short History of Ethics 117fn2
    After Virtue 117, 121
    'Breaking the Chains of Reason' 117fn1
    'Kierkegaard' 117fn1
    Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry 122, 123fn13, 127
    Whose Justice, Which Rationality? 122
McPherran, Mark L. 42
  The Religion of Socrates 4fn3, 41
Manguel, Robert, *A History of Reading* 137fn2
Marcuse, Herbert, *Reason and Revolution* 90fn3
Marino, Gordon, *Cambridge Companion to Kierkeegard* (co-editor) 180fn7
Martyr 13, 45, 55, 95, 190, 191, 196
Marx, Karl 61, 72, 90-1, 100, 114, 119
masks, and self-revelation 99-100
  see also unmasking
Master Thief 3, 4, 10-11, 190, 191
mediation, Constantine Constantius on 161
memory 146
midwife
  Johannes Climacus as 223
  Socrates as 6, 33, 78, 132, 188
mistrust
  rationalization 91
  and trust 90-1
Møller, Poul Martin 35
moods 7, 9, 55, 72, 198, 203, 208
Mooney, E.F.
  'Acknowledgement, Suffering, and Praise' 26fn11, 59fn40
  'Becoming What We Pray' 12fn16
  'Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition' 112fn11
  'Kierkegaard's Job Discourse' 171fn67
  Knights of Faith and Resignation 165fn38, 170fn61, 192fn32, 227fn2
  'Music of the Spheres' 76fn20
  'Repetition: Getting the World Back' 112fn12
  Selves in Discord and Resolve 90fn6, 117fn2, 121fn9-10, 166fn42, 167fn48, 206fn4, 212fn22
  'What has Hegel to Do with Henry James?' 114fn15
  'Whatever Happened to Ordinary Subjectivity' 72fn14
moral inquiry modes 127-8
  Encyclopedic 127
  Genealogical 127, 128
  Tradition 127-8
moral personality 48, 50. 78, 80, 133, 159, 178-9, 180-8, 198
Moriah 8, 101, 138, 139, 147
  in Tivoli 143-4, 147
Muench, Paul, 'Kierkegaard's Socratic Task' 4 fn2, 13fn17, 26fn12
Mulhall, Stephen 123fn12
  Inheritance and Originality 206fn4
  'Sources of the Self's Senses of Itself' 206fn4
Murdoch, Iris, The Sovereignty of Good 119fn7
music 19, 23, 240-1

Myth of Er 18, 22

Nagel, Thomas, The View from Nowhere 238fn21
Nathan 11fn13
Nehamas, Alexander, The Art of Living 26fn12
Newman, Barnett 241
Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm 43, 48, 61, 76fn21, 90-1, 100, 107, 114, 118-9, 173, 193
Notebene, Nicholas 5fn5, 39
Nussbaum, Martha 7, 91
  'Aristotle on Human Nature' 11fn14
  The Therapy of Desire 7fn7

objectivity 184-5
Øieblikket (*Augenblick)* xi, 70, 86, 107fn1
  connotations 107fn1, 109fn5
  and death 111
  and the eternal 114fn17
  Kierkegaardian motif 110
  power of 113-14
  and repetition 114-15
  and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 108-10, 114fn15-16
orientation 9, 23, 183-6, 202-3, 208, 213, 214, 226

The Paradox 30, 40, 48, 101, 120, 222, 224fn14, 242
Parfit, Derek, *Reasons and Persons* 100fn23
passionate utterances
  Cavell on 52-3
  effects of 53
  love as 66
  performativity 53
passions 7, 8, 9, 12, 12fn16, 17, 39, 43, 55-7, 59, 62, 63, 73, 77-8, 121, 124, 133, 139, 149, 169, 194, 198, 203-4, 207-8, 210, 214, 218, 220, 225, 231
Pattison, George 56, 81, 189, 196-7
  on knowledge 82-3
  on poetry 45
  works
    "'Before God' as a Regulative Concept" 120fn8
    Kierkegaard, Religion 4fn2, 72fn13
    'Kierkegaard and the Sublime' 196fn40
    Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses 26fn12, 46fn21, 107fn1
    The Philosophy of Kierkegaard 27fn14, 30fn20, 33, 46fn23
    'Poor Paris!' 72fn13, 137fn1, 140, 147fn37
    A Short Course 81fn33
peep shows 148fn39
perfectionism 74, 193-4
performative utterances 51-2
performativity, passionate utterances 53
Perkins, Robert L., *International Kierkegaard Commentary* 36fn27, 119fn5, 158fn5, 162fn22, 167fn44, 220fn5
personality, and subjectivity 184
  see also moral personality
Phillips, D.Z.
  Can Religion be Explained? 123fn12, 206fn4
  Death and Immortality 25fn9
Pippin, Robert
  Henry James and Modern Moral Life 7, 114
  Philosophical Romanticism 10fn11
Plato
  city of words 74
  narratives 18
  works
    Apology 17, 18, 21, 22, 45
    The Collected Dialogues 17fn20
    Crito 18
    Euthyphro 21
    Lysis 13
    Phaedo 13, 24
    Republic 13, 18, 22
    Symposium 5, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 44, 77
    Theages 18, 22fn4, 23, 82
pledge 13, 64, 98, 184fn17, 186, 226
  self-knowledge as 64-5, 186, 226
poetry xi, 21, 24, 44-5, 53, 56-7, 59, 69, 71, 75, 81-5, 110, 130-1, 183, 196fn38, 209, 225-6, 230, 246
  and love 23, 40, 45
  Pattison on 45, 81, 225

and religiosity 45
polarity technique 118
polemics, SK's 35, 62, 70, 72, 99, 190, 191, 194
Poole, Roger, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* 159fn14, 162fn23, 166fn41
Possen, David, 'Søren Kierkegaard' 26fn12
prayer xi, 240, 241
silence of 8
Socratic 30
Private Individual 5fn5
pseudonymity 187, 189
pseudonyms 39, 101, 201, 204-6
purpose 205
see also authority, transfer to reader

quietude 229-32, 239

Randall, John Herman, *Plato* 25fn9
reading
being read 6, 11, 74, 190
for love 89
transformative power of 53-4
reason 40, 43, 48fn8, 50, 58-9, 80, 117fn2, 118-26, 132, 166, 169, 172, 185-6, 192-4, 206fn4, 218, 222-5, 232
recollection
knowledge as 13
repetition, comparison 161-2, 172-3
reflexive recognition 113-14
Regine, SK's fiancée 101, 102, 104, 158
religion 47, 57, 72, 83, 84, 154, 183, 191, 207fn11, 235, 240,
definition 41
Fitzgerald on 41
religiosity
and poetry 45
Socrates 40-3
Religiousness A/B 29, 30-1, 32fn22, 48
repetition
as atonement 170
as consciousness 168
Constantine Constantius' name 160
Constantine Constantius on 160-1, 162-3, 165-6
deliverance of 132fn27
in *Either/Or* 159
eternity as 170
expression of 165
in *Fear and Trembling* 160
gift of 112, 113
and 'letting something happen' 131fn24
meaning 157, 158fn5
as metaphysical concept 165-6, 167, 169
need of 112, 113
and *Øieblikket* 114-15
possibility of 157, 162, 163-4, 172-4
recollection, comparison 162, 172-3
seductions 159
SK on 159fn14, 167-72
as task for freedom 157, 167-8
true 160
vs recollection 161-2, 172-3
responsiveness, and subjectivity 81, 85
revocation, *Postscript* 217-18, 219-23, 224, 225-6
Richard III 142
Ricoeur, Paul
The Conflict of Interpretations 90fn4
Time and Narrative 115fn18
Roberts, Robert C. 132
'Existence, Emotion, and Virtue' 180fn7
Roberts, Tyler, *Contesting Spirit* 80fn31, 90fn5
Robinson, Marcia C. 4, 131fn23
'Kierkegaard's Conception of Poetic Living' 48fn24
'Tieck' 22fn4
Rorty, Richard 55fn32
Rudd, Anthony
Expressing the World 100fn22
Kierkegaard after MacIntyre (co-editor) 100fn23, 117fn2, 119fn5
Russell, Bertrand 93

Sartre, Jean-Paul 119, 139
Satan
qualities 96fn16
SK as 95, 96
Schiller, Friedrich 61
Schmidt, Dennis, *Germans and other Greeks* 54fn31
scripture 241
seductions
repetition 159
Socratic 24, 26
self

essence of 185
flow 10
formation 9
as freedom 167-8
narrative view of 100fn23
responsibility for 185fn20, 186
shape shifting 9
SK's search for 6-8
see also soul
self-examination 76-7
in reading SK 6, 10, 11
self-knowledge, 64-5, 184fn17, 186
as pledge 65
self-revelation, and masks 99-100
Sen, Amartya, 'East and West' 117fn2
Sheehan, Thomas, 'Reading Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' 69fn8
Sibbern, Frederick 75fn19, 95
silence 12
inducement, Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses 229, 230, 232
Kierkegaardian 236-7
modes of 236-7
and wisdom 12
see also Socratic ignorance
Silenos 93
Simmons, J. Aaron, *A Conversation Between Neighbors* (co-editor) 103fn26
sin-consciousness 48
sketches, experiments, SK 3-11
Socrates 118
allure of 202-3
and Christian doctrines 55
daimon 19, 24, 35-6, 55
death 19, 35
fluidity 47-8
influence on SK 6, 8, 13, 19
inner beauty, vs outward appearance 205, 207
on love 18, 22, 56, 65
in love 22, 82
as midwife 6, 78, 132, 188
new, need for 32
Oracle 19
as *postmortem* Christian 51-4
religion 19
religiosity 40-3
ritual obligation, fulfilment 42
the seducer 23, 24, 26
SK as 95, 96-7
SK's exemplar 37-8
as solo dancer 17, 22, 44, 58
the storyteller 22-3
trust in 14, 16-17, 22, 24
Socratic humanism 80-1
Socratic ignorance 6, 12, 13, 27, 45, 55, 76, 81, 85, 131, 134, 226
acceptance 129
Socratic interrogation, pros and cons 13-17
Socratic knowledge 12, 17, 64, 81-2, 184fn17
self-knowledge 64-5, 186, 226
Socratic religiousness 30
Socratic scrutiny, limits to 58, 59
Socratic seduction 24, 26
Solo Dancer 5fn5
Sophocles 54
on humankind 41
soul
boundaries of 11
as site of sublime 198fn44
and the university 74
valuing 39
varieties of 10-11
see also self
Spinoza, Baruch 103fn25
spirit 39
Stemning see attunement
Stevens, Wallace 71
Stewart, Jon
Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries 4fn2, 22fn5
Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2001 (co-editor) 137fn2
Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered 74fn18
Strawser, Michael, *Both/And* 49fn26, 133fn28
subjectivity 46, 53, 72, 78, 124, 130, 139, 155, 166, 169, 179, 184-5, 191, 192, 195, 207fn11, 208, 214, 218, 219, 233, 238, 239
activation of 212-13
awakening 206-7
as *Bildung* 187
Cartesian 62, 63
enabling 204-6

engaging 204
Kierkegaardian 62, 63, 178-9, 184
and Lessing 183
and personality 184
and responsiveness 81, 85
strands 181-3
truth as 11fn12, 63, 66fn4, 132, 180, 181, 184, 219-20, 222
and words 71
the sublime 84-5, 93fn11, 149, 154-6, 170-1, 189, 194-9
anxious sublime 149, 189, 196-7, 224
Kantian 196
soul as site of 198fn44
Thoreau on 197fn42
see also ethical sublime
suspicion, hermeneutics of *see* hermeneutics of suspicion

Tarquin the Proud 143, 144
Taylor, A.E. 47
Taylor, Charles
Ethics of Authenticity 174fn74
Philosophical Arguments 174fn74
'What is Human Agency' 168fn53
temporality 10, 68, 86, 107
Tertullian 40
theory, dangers of 174
Thompson, E.P., *Out of Apathy* 117fn1
Thoreau, Henry 54, 61, 69, 77, 81, 197fn42
Cavell on 42fn13
Til Eulenspiegel 3, 4, 190, 191
time
requited 10, 157, 196
unrequited 9, 10, 71, 115fn18
Tivoli 28, 110, 137fn1, 144
Christ wax-figure 141
Fear and Trembling parallels 142, 154
Kierkegaardian critique of 141
moral criticisms of 141
Moriah in 143-4, 147
opening 140-1
Toulmin, Stephen, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (co-author) 39fn6
trust
and mistrust 90-1
in Socrates 14, 16-17, 22, 24
truth 14
exemplars of 211
love of 44
passion for 133-4
pursuit of 57, 129-30, 132
SK's approaches to 134, 191fn31
as subjectivity 11fn12, 63, 66fn4, 132, 180, 181, 184, 219-20, 222

university 26, 71-85, 131, 229, 232-4
and academic pursuits 12fn15, 16, 26, 31, 38, 40, 72, 74-5, 131, 181, 211, 218, 226, 227-9, 231-236, 238-41
instrumental role 79
passion for texts 79-80
and the soul 74
unmasking, and hermeneutics of suspicion 100-1; *see also* masks

value 39, 63, 69, 74, 91, 128, 133, 160, 162, 170, 172-4, 178, 224-5
Vienna Circle 220
virtues 7, 17-8, 55fn33, 63, 113, 127, 128-31, 177-8, 180, 182, 184, 187, 193-4, 198, 203, 208, 214, 238, 242
volitional humility 120

Walsh, Sylvia
Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard (co-editor) 236fn19
Living Poetically 212fn23-4
The Wandering Jew 3, 4, 190-1
Webb, Steve 28fn16, 40fn9, 167fn46, 221fn8
Weber, Max, 'Science as a Vocation' 61fn1
West, Clark 11fn13, 38fn4, 103fn25, 235fn15, 241fn27
Westphal, Merold
Kierkegaard's Critique 90fn3
Suspicion and Faith 90
Wilde, Oscar, *Portrait of Dorian Gray* 10
will
checking 133
limitations 119, 120, 232
mobilization 130
receptiveness 130-1
Williams, Rowan, *Grace and Necessity* 66fn4

Wirzba, Norman, *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (co-editor) 12fn16
wisdom 14, 23
  Bugbee on 93-4
  and silence 12
  tactile
    examples 77-8, 93-4
    and the shadowy visitor 78
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus* 39, 219, 220, 224fn14
wonder 41, 42, 56, 57, 60, 73, 81,-5, 112, 132, 146, 168, 171, 196-7, 207, 224-6, 234-6, 242
Wood, David, *A Conversation Between Neighbors* (co-editor) 103fn26
words
  Cavell on 66fn5, 81
  city of, Plato 74
  discursive/non-discursive use 230-1
  life of 67-70
  limitations of 71
  power of 230
  and subjectivity 71
  transformative power 65-6, 68-9, 70
  and worlds 71, 73, 74, 242
worlds, and words 71, 73, 74, 242

Xenophon 141

young man
  in *Repetition* 8, 164-5, 171
  in *Theages* 18, 23, 82