Transforming Philosophy and Religion

Love's Wisdom

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Love, This Lenient Interpreter

On the Complexity of a Life

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If there is a correct blindness, only love has it.
—Stanley Cavell

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 spirits (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.

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.” 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 expose, 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 or sadness and can 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
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fissures should be a prelude to a “lenient” care and receptivity—that is, if we read from a generosity of spirit.

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. But somewhat paradoxically, a hermeneutics of charity, love, or affirmation can live side by side with a hermeneutics of suspicion. 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.

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 bank on scandal, sleaze, or evil just because it’s there, or who gloat as 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 premodern faith in the good in an age whose maturity is to applaud the armies of doubt. Later on, I make the case for the primacy of trust. Why should doubt or suspicion be given priority?

Mistrust can be overrated and seem like childish stalling, or it can 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 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. Love’s hermeneutics is drowned out, dead at the gate, if there’s no place for praising trust, charity, or generosity. 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, miniatures, poems; or on 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.  

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. "My aim," he confides, "is to uncover the cracks in the granite of genius."  

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

2. Suspicion lurks in the author's self-assigned task of uncovering cracks: are we assuming 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 domi-nant. If genius can wear its cracked vulnerability on its sleeve, it needn't be uncovered.
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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. Yet a different disposition might speak of the fissures of a genius as wounds crying for attention, pleading to be healed or to be discreetly covered by a scarf.

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 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 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, to 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 from the preface to this biography, Seek cracks in the granite of genius! in a better light, and in a register quite opposite to the intent of our Copenhagen biographer. That striking aphorism can be brought to a more charitable site where a beam of love can shine through. Reading through “love, that lenient interpreter” should yield a more interesting, attractive, and profound thinker and writer than is available when we set out to shatter him.

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 at someone else’s mess. But windows
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might work differently. The ancient Silenos figure—so like Socrates—may have a hard, repellent 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.

**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 Bugbee explores a kind of "tactile wisdom" or intimacy with one's surround that he calls "immersion."12 To know the world one is immersed in is to have immediate visceral access. There's cognition in being caught up imaginatively and affectively in making or composing but also 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.13 It's not cerebral, nor 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 also resembles knowing God in wrestling him, or knowing him in something like the musical theophany at the end of the biblical 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 knowl-
edge. 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.

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, tactfully, 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, swed, 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 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 a strolling citizen, or as Copenhagen's Socrates? 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 semi-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 things jell a certain way. It happens, pure and simple, without augst, articulate authority.

"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
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wouldn’t help to find a reassuring signature, “Made by SK” affixed to swirling shards, for we still can 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 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 jell.17

Consider three images that we find in the frontispiece to Alastair Han-nay’s 1982 Kierkegaard book: Socrates, Satan, and Saint.18 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 steadfastly loyal 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 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.

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 that 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 have that life include what those books accomplished in his name. 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.19 Affection for Mephisto might yield a kind of wisdom. Perhaps he’s a lovable imp, and so quite forgivable. 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 bat if an initiating image betokens a generous spirit or a cramped and choking one.

The initiating image 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 as readers (or writers) on the interpretative path we hew but 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 priority of trust.

Say interpretation goes “all the way down.” To start up, it has to bottom out. If we don’t touch bottom, then there’s no interpretation. We start with that unauthorized immediate sense, “This is Kierkegaard!” or amidst a whirl, “This is Socrates—Kierkegaard!” That’s the given there to work with. Of course, we can take a step back from the task of interpretation and observe that what we take as bottom is theoretically contingent, and that we take something as bottom, so that what strikes us as inescapably bottom in fact is a tacit piece of interpretation. But if anything like an explicit interpretation is to get going, it has to start with the sense of givenness, that this is where we start.

Ending Upbeat

The given is not theoretically secure, but it’s given, nonetheless. It’s practically necessary and forcefully evident experientially, imaginatively, as that which strikes us. That’s Socrates! Ah! It’s a duck-rabbit! The bottom that gives us footing, purchase, might have been otherwise, might not hold. There might be no bottom (if I went probing). Cavell says that the one permissible (or “correct”) blindness is the blindness of love, of falling in love with the world. Of course, we might have loved a different world, or never loved at all. So if we venture the skeptical step back, skepticism will no doubt find a foothold. But to venture down this backward stepping road gives theory and the rational demand for footing the upper hand and leaves us hamstrung. It dissolves—often for no good reason at all—the certitudes of contact. The sense of needing to get off that road of skeptical possibility can obtrude, for one traveling unwillingly on it, and thankfully it does, and a forward path of gifted groundedness can supervene to save us. We let a practical, imaginative imperative supervene. We just let the inescapable draw of a Kierkegaard—Socrates have its way with us—take over. The theoretical possibility of traveling a different path isn’t refuted (theoretically). It’s replaced by that which calls on us, here and now, with immediate necessity. Then the space of actual interpretation supervenes. We
find ourselves already in the venture of interpretation, which means a sense of felt rock bottom will have appeared with the simultaneous sense that an unfolding job of reading has begun. Socrates is gift and task. Love of life and works is gift and task. We’re already knee-deep in Kierkegaard interpretation. Someone else can second-guess, unsettle footings. So here’s the quasi-Kantian transcendental formulation for the priority of trust: If interpretative reading is underway and so exists, its condition is that interpretation is not free-floating, that it touches bottom, that it builds on something that in that local context is basic. If our interpretation runs full tilt ahead, then it’s a practical necessity that we have trust in that.21

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, we can suspect a penchant for uncovering 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 fragmentary.

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 it is at present includes its promise for tomorrow. This reminds us that we’re dealing here with narrative truths (plural), not the
chimera of a sole timeless truth of the matter. A courtroom demand for all the truth and nothing but the truth is at cross-purposes with honest growth and is, in any case, impossible. This deflates the charge, barely disguised in the recent Copenhagen biography, that Kierkegaard in his multiplicities deceives, is even the arch deceiver, out to engineer cover-ups, here or there or even everywhere.

Closer to the Text

“Hilarious Bookbinder,” a lesser pseudonym, offers the public something our biographer calls a “counterfeit.”22 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 was “all along,” a single work. But why assume 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. 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 formation of a modern (or postmodern) self.23

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
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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 on a brave face, 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 countenance is masked in grief. These crucial moments of self-revelation require a face—a face that 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 inherit, 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 backs. It's not a matter of a preexisting self-essence getting pressed out into view. A self-expressive visage is just an expression than which there is nothing deeper at the moment. It's not put on or delivered by something "deeper" that exists "earlier" than the delivery. 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 Climacius" 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 contemporary metaphysics of the self. But I do hope to have given life to the idea that Kierkegaard puts his signature on the age by writing out, living 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 also 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 of Kierkegaard by generations of philosophers and theologians—by Bulmann, 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.

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 thus 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 Regina (intermixed with worldly expectations). The perceived total, exclusive, and exhaustive demands of each—his commitment to writing (religiously) seems every bit as all-consuming as his commitment to his fiancée—force 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 Regina. But neither can we say it would have been right to abandon a writer or religious vocation for her sake. 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 the central, twisting conflict of the text. And we can also see thereby the impossible redemption it 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, 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 abiding by the general moral injunction that a father love and protect his son—_along with_ the weight of having made a particular demand that Isaac, his son, must die by his father's hand—_along with_ 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 with its radically divergent, even
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incompatible, implications is impressive, to say the least. Yet I’d think that lurking somewhere in this dramatic interchange between God and Abraham must be the thought that God’s capacity to live with and in this field of wrenching conflict (impossibilities are possible for him) is at the same time an aspect of Abraham’s capacity to live with and in this field of wrenching conflict (impossibilities might be possible for him).22 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). And 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. Abraham’s trust or faith that God will give him Isaac back is akin to God’s “trust or faith” that ordering Isaac to be sacrificed is compatible with expecting Abraham to keep loving Isaac—and compatible with expecting Abraham to keep believing in the promise that Isaac’s seed will not perish, that he’ll get Isaac back. How can God not see the obvious incompatibilities—the impossibilities—here?23

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 for his religiously writerly existence. Or alternatively, in opting for a religiously writerly existence, in a suspension of the ethical requirement that he honor his engagement to Regine, he would have maintained the “impossible” faith and hope that he would get her back.24 Yet do we fault Kierkegaard for falling short of such unbelievable 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 masks and pseudonyms not only hide but also 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 more than a dozen pages on a confessedly undocumented bordello incident, on fear of syphilis, and on the criminality of masturbation in the culture’s imagination. All this makes for “interesting” reading, as Kierkegaard
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might say. It tells us something about cultural sensibilities and fears in Copen-

hagen (and elsewhere) in nineteenth-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 Kier-

kegaard's life and works—an effect decidedly in excess of the part that these

factors might play in the most commonplace of lives, and so perhaps deter-

minative of the shape of this most extraordinary life and work? Why do we

assume that these fears had greater effect than his love of expensive meals or

chatting with town folk, or surveying the sea—or perhaps more to the point, his

passion for Shakespeare, Mozart, and Socrates? The general rule, 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 is gained by our exposure to these revelations? Perhaps they're

included just to feed a voyeuristic disposition.

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.30

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 thereby 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 sus-

pense. But the question remains whether what purports to be a major biogra-

phy 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, sophisti-
cated, but ultimately condescending hammer tap.

A more generous look would marvel at the dazzling transformation Kier-

kegaard 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, so we should read.31 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 then, as a climber might, trace in them the

pathways for a gentle, tactile knowledge of the writer and his texts.
NOTES

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.


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


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.”

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: Thoreau and Cavell on Seeing and Believing” (forthcoming). Somewhere in this taxonomy we should note the parallels and differences between “knowledge of the sublime,” 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 which 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 thesmatics, all in a rage. Emily Dickinson tells us “Pain—has an Element of Blank—/ It cannot recollect /
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When it began—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" (1862).


13. See note 11, above.

14. For Thoreau on contact, see the final paragraphs in The Maine Woods detailing his descent from Katahdin.

15. "Acknowledgment" is a term of art central to the writing of Stanley Cavell, a way of contact with oneself, others, and the world that is not, in the classic sense, a matter of knowing.

16. In the background, I hear Jack Caputo's "obligation happens." See John D. Caputo, Against Ethics (Bloomington: 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!"

17. On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemic, Lost Intimacy, and Time (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007), chap. 10, in which I characterize the swirl of moral views as "the ethical sublime."


19. 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.

20. Stanley Cavell calls this sort of yielding to (or trust in) the given, despite the persistence of possible skeptical retorts, "falling in love with the world," the only "correct blindness" as he puts it, that there is (Cavell, The Claim of Reason [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], 431). This is a theme I discuss at length in "Acknowledgment, Suffering, and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," Soundings 88, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 393–411, and in "J. Glenn Gray and Hannah Arendt: Poetry in a Time of War," in American Intimates (Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton Press, 2008).

21. This embryonic transcendental deduction of "the given," I suggest, resembles Ricoeur's recognition of the necessity of a "second naiveté," and Kierkegaard calls it 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" (Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985], 200). See too, my Selves in Discord and Resolve, 72ff. and 86ff.


24. "Behold the dawn! The face of things is changed by it!" Here Job's Whirlwind Voice unveils an expressive world with no "essential world" behind it of which it is the expression. Embracing an expressive self is not embracing the picture of an essential self that "pushes itself out" in expressions. For a helpful discussion, see Anthony Rudd, Expressing the World: Skepticism, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger (Chicago: Open Court, 2003).

25. There are a number of critiques of a "narrative unity" view of the self as well as


27. 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 as a variation on Spinoza's claim. The formula corresponding to Spinoza's might be, "A person's struggles with God are God's struggle with God."


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

On Søren Kierkegaard
Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time

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ASHGATE
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 terrorliness 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.)