

KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING*:
AN ETHICS OF BECOMING AND THE ETHICAL SUBLIME¹

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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. I provide a wide angle for this exploration of becoming and of the sublime taken as an aspect of ethics. The opening tactic is to trace the several clusters of literature that Kierkegaard produces as in fact tracking an ethical development. Seeing the interplay of these clusters produces a kind of vertigo that provides a clue to the experience of an ethical sublime, an anxious sublime, a place of freedom, possibility, and fear and trembling.

We can start at one end of the panorama of the authorship, with Kierkegaard's earliest unpublished writings as we find them in his *Journals and Papers*.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 somewhat 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 These papers are roughly similar to Wittgenstein's unpublished notes and notebooks, which have now been stitched into a dozen "books," starting with *Investigations*. These unpublished

writings form a ‘text-bundle’ along with two others. Their dynamic interaction will be seen as an instance of the Kantian sublime; and considering that interaction will be seen as an opening to and prod toward an ethical freedom; hence, an instance of ‘the ethical sublime’.

§ 1 *Passing Freedom*

George Pattison shows us how the discourse literature in Kierkegaard’s right hand sustains and supports the pseudonymous literature in his left. 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 dependencies 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.

Consider the ethical impulse behind pseudonymity.² Kierkegaard has “Johannes de silentio” as ‘author’ of *Fear and Trembling*; dispersal, or blurring of authority continues as silentio

refuses to speak for himself, but introduces “an old man” as remembering the ‘beautiful’ biblical story that Kierkegaard (or silentio? or this anonymous old man?) will consider. This dispersal frees Kierkegaard from total oversight of meaning, and frees us, as readers, from the fear that Kierkegaard can definitively refuse our reading – in his own voice. He says in effect, “The text is Johannes de silentio’s”, and silentio says, “The text is the old man’s”, which teaches us that an ethical author, an ethical speaker, at some point steps aside, saying: “The text is yours; I step aside!” It stands on its own to assist us, as readers, to stand on *our* own. There is no ghostly seat backstage from which Kierkegaard can whisper answers. Readings require our ethical, responsive effort. We might set off on the hapless search for a yet-to-be-uncovered authoritative interpretative code. But this 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 to us.* It would be a refusal to be *dealt with* by the texts, to be *read* by them.³

§ 2 *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, then quickly switches to life *outside* the law. 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 him against the city.⁴ Faust is *skeptical* of established order. The prankster Eulenspiegel *shakes up* the solemn social center. The Wandering Jew defies social place by being 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, 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 a diverting pose. At this point in his life, trying on roles can't be *just* amusement. He seeks an exemplar as a guide to *something worthy to pursue*. In time, becoming a polemical writer takes on increasing plausibility. Writing in opposition yields 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. He escapes living into them by taking them only experimentally.

From this point of view, rejection by church officials or by *The Corsair* insures a target 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 beckoning the prospect of getting ever clearer about an abiding cause that’s *worthwhile*?⁵

At this 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.

§ 3 *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, and that has ethics spread 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.⁶ 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 also is religious. *Works of Love* has no suspension of the ethical. But we no doubt need distinctions among kinds of lives addressed by ethics, and perhaps one sort of ethics gets suspended as another threatens to take 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 are hardly a failure 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 William 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; one is

never, in personal or religious relations, say, beyond reproach. It's an idea of incompleteness, of something dim or dark left unattained, of a kind of ever-receding call of something more and better than one's present resting place. 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.

After having obeyed the rules, played out one's social role, done what "any rational moral agent must," and satisfied the 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 lack of finish 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 the dark of 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.⁷

Here, expressed in a painfully telegraphic shorthand, are four central themes in what Cavell calls moral perfectionism, a pattern that I suggests 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.*⁸

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. Theses 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 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 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 a welcome for 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.

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: test these through dialogue, meditation, and continuing exploration, their depth and staying power. 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 Hildegard 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, and 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.

§ 4 *The Dangerous Edge of Ethics*

I've set to one side posted virtues, rules of prohibition, and conventional roles 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.*"⁹ Death 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).¹⁰ 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 to be a deep, opaque response to the pain and loneliness of death – and also (we can 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 those nearest. 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 who I am and might become, who Kierkegaard is and might become, who a child is and might become.

§ 5 *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 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. Then the possibility of openness to wonder, enablement, consolidation, or

faith painfully absents itself.¹¹ 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’”!

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.¹² 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 Caverns, each clamoring for recognition, declaring the edge of representation and comprehension, the edge of identity and stable ethics.

There’s another setting Pattison describes, not identified directly as an instance of sublimity, but to my ear, one that conjures it.¹³ This is not a wild sea or cityscape, but an inner prospect, an “inscape” of ultimate significance. He describes a brush with “primal loss of continuity,” which describes a primal reckoning with *an anxious ethical sublime*.¹⁴

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.

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.¹⁵ 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.

§ 6 *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 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 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 hope one will be restored.

From the edge, we're given 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 under girds 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.

§ 7 *Unsettled Authorship*

We see a writer consolidate 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. 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).¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 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 them 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, 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. And awakens us to a creation in which our time is but an instant.

NOTES

¹ This is an extract from my *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Ashgate, 2007, Chapt. 10, 188-199.

² 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 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. See *On Soren Kierkegaard*, Chapter Twelve on revocation.

³ 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. Again, there is no ghostly seat backstage from which Kierkegaard can whisper answers.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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, *The Wisdom of Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame, 2004, 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.

⁶ 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*, State University of New York Press, 1991.

⁷ See Cavell’s discussion in *Cities of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2005.

⁸ 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*, MacMillan, 200, p. 29.

⁹ Hamlet, III, i.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Pattison, “Kierkegaard and the Anxious Sublime,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1998.

¹³ George Pattison, ‘Poor Paris,’ *Kierkegaard’s Critique of the Spectacular City* de Gruyter, 1999.

¹⁴ We find a fragile tumult tilting toward the possibility of life.

¹⁵ 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*.

¹⁶ Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, p. 197.

¹⁷ This “moment” is the moment of the glance or *Augenblick*, discussed in Chapter Six. My route to the sublime comes through Pattison’s *Kierkegaard Studies Year Book* article, which keys the sublime to anxiety 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 too. As one commentator has put it, there's 'meta-ethical madness at heart of personality.'