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Abstract

This project examines the concept of *decision* in philosophical writing, in particular the question of whether subjectivity can be said to constitute a 'locus' of decision. The writing of Søren Kierkegaard is the main focus of discussion. Giorgio Agamben, Michel Henry and Jacques Derrida also provide important contributions.

Although for Kierkegaard 'all decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity', subjective agency takes the form of an active surrendering to an external unknown authority (God). Kierkegaard uses the term 'leap of faith' to describe the moment of decision where subjective transformation occurs.

For Derrida, any decision requires an undecidable leap beyond all reasoning made in preparation for that decision. He extends a reading of faith beyond the theistic by suggesting that Kierkegaard's unknowable God could also be another name for the 'structure of subjectivity.'

Giorgio Agamben's writing on the concept of human life situated at the threshold of categories (socio-political, philosophical, physiological and so on), helps to further the exploration of subjectivity as the 'locus' of decision. Michel Henry's work on *The Essence of Manifestation* provides a focus for a discussion on the 'radical subjectivity' that Kierkegaard proposes as the fulcrum of decision.

The research project as a whole maintains a synergy between these philosophical concerns and the form of their explication. The thesis is made up of both written text and DVD documentation of live works. These instances of practice, whose form and mode of presentation were informed by a specific aspect of the research, are integrated into the thesis to constitute 'chapters'. The practice can and does function independently in other contexts. However, what is presented in this research document constitutes the outcome of my practice-based PhD project and includes both the 'theoretical' and 'practice' elements.

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Introduction

At the centre of this project has always been the question: What does it mean to make a decision? In order to approach this general question, it must be broken down into several more specific areas: Who or what is the agent of decision? What is it that occurs in a decision as such or what does decision actually give rise to? At what point can I say that such a thing as a decision takes place, if it takes place at all?

The question I am asking is in fact to do with the 'locus' of decision. Subjectivity, the 'I' who *makes* the decision, may be said to be such a 'locus' but as soon as the investigation begins, subjectivity, as a *locatable* agency, starts to dissolve.

In order to address this problem, I looked at the writings of philosophers who have approached the question of decision from the point of view of subjectivity, that is, not as an attempt to look at objective analysis or in terms of, for example, 'decision theory'. Instead, the exploration that I carried out is concerned with the connection between *thought* and *subjectively lived experience* and the kind of philosophical thinking that takes into account these two, often contradictory, spheres of human existence.

My interests in the research question are philosophical, but I am not a philosopher in a conventional sense. The environment that I have worked in over the years has been fine art practice. Although I have been studying philosophy independently for many years, I have no formal qualifications in the subject. This fostered in me a level of uncertainty as to where I could situate myself as a researcher. I wanted to explore the research question philosophically whilst still remaining an artist. The situation of not entirely belonging in one discipline or the other turned out to have intrinsic value in developing the research, not least in keeping me keenly attuned to the notion of threshold that I was trying to explore. Therefore, I decided that it was in the best interests of what I was trying to do to make the most of this in-between status (an

artist engaged with philosophical questions or vice-versa?) and to develop a philosophically inspired practice of my own.

the practice

I am interested in what constitutes the ‘practice’ of philosophy, that is, something which is not only an intellectual activity orientated towards universalising or objectifying aims but which also has emotional, playful or embodied aspects, in brief, an activity where contingency and subjectivity play a role. This aspect is frequently erased in the final product of philosophy, that is, the printed text or the conference paper. What process occurs in the formation of the ‘philosopher’ in his or her professional guise and in the development of the work that is called philosophy? At what point and by whose authority can a person say ‘I am a philosopher’ and what authority does this designation then hold? I wondered whether the practice of the philosopher could be compared to that of the artist and whether there is a way in which each can inform the other. As much as possible, I wanted to avoid making work or indeed writing *about* philosophy. I was looking for a way that I could *do* something that might be called philosophical, even if it was not conventionally recognisable as philosophy in the academic or institutional sense. The works that are presented with the thesis are the results of my endeavour towards such a philosophical practice.

Practice-based doctoral research in a fine-art context often means that the researcher writes an academic thesis about their area of interest and presents their artworks independently of the thesis. In such an approach, the division between what constitutes theory and what constitutes practice is made clear (at least in terms of presentation and methodology). Although my research was also practice-based, to impose a strict separation between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ seemed entirely antithetical to my concerns. I felt that the interdisciplinary nature of what I was doing meant, precisely, that I would be working in the space between fine art and philosophy and that my task was to develop a practice which would be situated there. With this in mind, it will be helpful for the purposes of this Introduction, to discuss the different forms of presentation included in this thesis as well as the theoretical sources.

In the course of the project, I produced a series of works which aimed to synthesise philosophical ideas with artistic practice in such a way that research question itself was performed, or enacted. Two of these are presented as DVD documents and included as part of the main thesis. These instances of practice function independently from the thesis: they have been and/or will continue to be presented within other contexts. Here, the written thesis itself provides one such contexts through which they can be seen. In terms of the final presentation of this research project, therefore, it is my intention that the DVD's are seen and interpreted in relation to the written text in the thesis. The effort I made in the presentation of the thesis was as much as possible towards a coherent structure so that the different formats function together as a self-contained body of research. I have tried to signpost the shifts in format in such a way that the reader can orientate the thesis easily, from reading to watching DVD's back to the text.

works on DVD

Onlookers is the title I give to a dialogue between two philosophers that was recorded on DVD. You will be directed to look at the DVD on p32 of the thesis. There is a Postscript on the dialogue on p119, which gives some the background and context for the discussion. With the risk of seeming evasive, I will presently refrain from introducing *Onlookers* in any detail here. Instead, for the sake of continuity, I would suggest that when p.32 is reached in the thesis, the reader watches the DVD of the discussion and then reads the Postscript on p.119 before continuing with the rest of the thesis.

Reading Michel Henry

Reading Michel Henry is a video diary documenting my reading of *The Essence of Manifestation*, by the philosopher Michel Henry, during the summer of 2005. The edited work was completed in February 2006. The diary documents my search for a deeper insight into the notion of 'radical subjectivity' introduced by Kierkegaard, though a reading this text. *Reading Michel Henry* also reflects how the activity of thinking is prone to the interruptions of everyday life and receptive to the context in which it takes place. I was interested in the formation of 'the expert' philosopher or the production of 'professional' philosophy emerging from a process of private endeavour, which, like that of any artist or writer, is marked by procrastination, struggle, doubt, discipline, elation, gratification and indeed a whole range of

experience. Such an enterprise is paralleled in the predicament of Kierkegaard's character Johannes Climacus, referred to later in the text (Chapter 7: Repetition).

The Essence of Manifestation as a publication is hard to find in English translation and the edition I bought was 'print on demand'. I donated the book to Chelsea library who arranged for it to be hard bound. The DVD and short text about the DVD is inserted into the cover as a supplement. Although the video can function independently, I see the book and DVD combined as a complete work in itself. Therefore, if someone refers to this thesis in Chelsea library, they will also be directed towards the book and the DVD together. The work (DVD and book together) is now kept as part of Chelsea's collection of artists' books and catalogued under both Michel Henry and my own name. In the catalogue it will also be linked to this thesis. For archiving purposes elsewhere (British library for example), a DVD will be inserted into the cover of the thesis along with the Chelsea library catalogue reference. Supplement 2 (p 135) of this thesis is a reflection on the process of making this work.

other work

Reading/performance: What is radical subjectivity?

This was a performance involving the reading of a research paper called 'What is radical subjectivity?' which I presented near the beginning of the project in February 2004. I invited a friend, Vasiliki Boutopoulous, to present a paper in my place at a small research symposium at Chelsea School of Art. Although many of those present knew me, none of them had met Vasiliki before. I introduced her to them at the beginning of the presentation and said that she would be presenting a paper in my place. I sat next to her while she delivered the paper. At the time, I saw this presentation as an experiment and did not foresee that it would be a significant moment in the development of the project. For this reason there is no video documentation of the performance but instead I have included a written reflection on the event and a transcript of the paper, which can be found in Supplement 3 (p.137 – 149), at the back of the thesis.

philosophical sources

The thesis is an exploration of the theme of 'locus of decision' with the notion of subjectivity as the specific locus in question. The primary resource in the research

has always been Søren Kierkegaard. For him, philosophical thinking could not be independent of existence and in his own life the role of writer, lover, citizen of Denmark, Christian and quite simply human being were matters that could not be excluded from the concerns of the philosopher. His life events also provided a sense of urgency, which compelled him to write. At the same time he showed, possibly more than any other philosopher, that the nature of human existence, including his own, was comic, terrifying and perplexing; an absurdity to which no language could adequately respond.

The biographical information that is available about Kierkegaard; his thwarted love for Regine Olsen, where he broke off his engagement with no clear explanation to her because he felt that he was not worthy of her; his epilepsy, an illness which would quite literally take the ground from under his feet; his role as a philosopher troubled by Christianity and as a Christian troubled by the uncompromising views and expectations that his personal faith demanded of him, all contribute to the intensity of his authorship.

Kierkegaard was a prolific writer producing both theological and philosophical texts, sometimes publishing several works at the same time. Stylistically, his approach was also diverse. He frequently wrote under pseudonyms, in 'indirect communication', the aim of which was to deflect authority away from himself, the writer, urging his readers to 'judge for themselves'.

In Kierkegaard, there is a kind of creative philosophical practice in which the form and style provide a stage where thought plays itself out and where something other than intellectual understanding is at stake.

In the thesis, I also bring in other thinkers in order to provide a counterpoint or additional insight into my reading of decision in Kierkegaard: Jacques Derrida (no discussion on decision could be complete without him), Giorgio Agamben, Étienne Balibar and Michel Henry.

The thesis is in two main sections:

Part One explores the figure of Abraham, the subject of Kierkegaard's great work *Fear and Trembling*, which is written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silencio.

This work uses the biblical story of Abraham who is commanded by God to kill his son Isaac as the basis for an exploration that can be read on two levels. Firstly, it examines whether it is possible (or desirable or correct) to suspend 'the ethical', that is moral or human law in favour of a higher purpose or divine law. Secondly, it examines what it means to have faith. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is something that can only be based on a belief in the (humanly) impossible and is therefore based on the absurd. *Fear and Trembling* can also be read as a reflection on Kierkegaard's failed engagement to Regine Olsen where he hopes against all reason that, having relinquished her, she may still return to him.

In order to elucidate this figure of Abraham and how it was possible to make his decision in faith, Derrida appears throughout and provides invaluable readings on the nature of faith, decision and sacrifice as well as the notion of a decisive subjectivity. Chapter two on 'Exception', is an exploration of Abraham through Agamben's figure of *homo sacer* and the category of 'the exception'. This is taken further with a live dialogue, presented in the form of a DVD. In chapter three ('Obedience'), the insights of Étienne Balibar and George Steiner are enlisted to further the discussion around the enigmatic Abraham and the nature of his obedience to God's demand. In the last chapter of Part One on the 'Invisible', there is another 'live' documentation, which explores the notion of radical subjectivity through a reading of Michel Henry's *Essence of Manifestation*. Part One focuses on the 'who' or 'what' that decides and the mechanisms that can be said to effect decision, for example faith, the leap and the moment.

Part Two uses as its main focus the figure of the actress who is the subject of a newspaper article by Kierkegaard called *Crisis and Crisis in the life of an actress*. The article is based on a theatre performance by the real life actress Johanne Luise Pätges Heiberg (1812-1890), wife of Johan Ludvig Heiberg, one of Denmark's leading literary and social figures. The article was written in 1847 and published in the newspaper *Fædrelandet* in July 1848. Chapter five ('Passion'), examines the elliptical subjectivity of the character Juliet and involves Étienne Balibar once more in a discussion of subjectivity and persona. The subsequent four chapters: 'Metamorphosis', 'Repetition', 'Anxiety' and 'Crisis', look at how the transformation is effected in the performance of the actress by drawing on other texts from Kierkegaard. This section is more about the 'how' of decision and stays closer

to Kierkegaard in order to examine the complex character of the actress and what is at stake for Kierkegaard himself in her ‘metamorphosis’.

One major omission in this discussion is Hegel, a key figure in Kierkegaard’s thinking. I made the decision to leave out any real discussion of Hegel for several reasons but mainly because if the thesis began to investigate Hegel, then the entire weight and feel of the thesis would have been altered. It would have become quite a different kind of discussion than I wanted it to be. This thesis is not intended as an ‘argument’, which pitches Kierkegaard against Hegel.

texts used in the thesis

Kierkegaard

Many of Kierkegaard’s works are written under pseudonyms but to avoid confusion, I always refer to the author as ‘Kierkegaard’, except for a short section on *Johannes Climacus* (Part Two). The texts of Kierkegaard that I have used in this thesis span what are normally considered to be his three periods of authorship. In the body of the thesis they are not used in any chronological thematic order, but for the purposes of this Introduction, I will present them as such (excluding the works of his youth):

First Authorship (1841-46): In this period, Kierkegaard starts to use pseudonyms or ‘indirect communication’. This authorship instigates what is known as Kierkegaard’s dialectic in which he presents three existential stages of development: the aesthetic, ethical and the religious. The dialectic, however, is never truly realised in the religious. During this time, Kierkegaard was working through the break-up of his relationship with Regine Olsen. In 1843 he discovered that she was engaged to be married to Johan Frederik Shlegel. The First Authorship also sees the beginning of the development of Kierkegaard’s ‘existential psychology’ whereby individuals are faced with having to decide and to take responsibility for their decisions. It is also when Kierkegaard’s critique on Hegel begins and when he overtly starts to consider whether or not to become religious (Christian).

The texts that I have used from this period are *Fear and Trembling*, published 1843 (and already cited above), *Repetition*, (Constantin Constantinius), *Philosophical*

Fragments and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. (both by Johannes Climacus) and *The Concept of Anxiety* (Vigilis Haufniensis)

Repetition, published concurrently with *Fear and Trembling* in 1843, is a 'philosophical narrative' comprised of the letters of a young man who is in love, but who cannot go through with marriage because it requires dedication to one person. This is an ethical duty which entails repetition, something he is either not ready for or of which he does not know himself to be capable. Recollection on the other hand falls under the category of the aesthetic. In recollection, the young man can only love his beloved after he leaves her, that is 'poetically'. The book is ostensibly written by a psychologist who 'discovers' this young man, befriends him, and then counsels him by correspondence. The author admits at the end of the book that there never was such a young man and that he had invented him.

Kierkegaard called the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846) Johannes Climacus, after a Greek monk (c.570-649) who wrote *Klimax tou Paradeisou* (*The Ladder of Paradise*). *Klimax*, which is Greek for ladder in this context refers to the thirty steps, that the monk Climacus claims lead to imperturbability, a quality that he believes all of those embarking on the monastic life should have. The idea of the ladder also represents a kind of logical progression from one premise to the next towards ultimate knowledge. Kierkegaard's author, Johannes Climacus, is a 'practicing doubter' who does not believe that development in spiritual matters can be approached in an objective or logical manner. Nonetheless, his is a 'philosophical' voice, and in *Johannes Climacus*, he tries to discover what it means to become a philosopher. In these works Kierkegaard insists on truth as subjective, not in a denial of objective truth, but rather in order to propose that truth can only be known and appropriated subjectively.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard begins the enquiry into the subjective approach to knowledge acquisition. He completes this work in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* which is in fact a much longer text than its precursor. This work was intended both as a conclusion to *Philosophical Fragments* and to Kierkegaard's career as writer. At the end of the book he takes leave of all of his pseudonyms which he lists and claims overtly as his own creations.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, also published in 1844, Kierkegaard examines the Christian doctrine of original sin and how it relates to what he calls anxiety. Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is a privileged existential state which can effect change. He proposes that it is freedom that brings about anxiety. The original sin, committed by Adam, was a qualitative change out of freedom into sinfulness. Every human being is born with the same freedom as Adam, and with that freedom comes its inherent anxiety. We are not born sinners but we become sinners through our own free choice. An awareness of sin, however, is the first step towards salvation.

The Second Authorship (1846- 53): This includes a period of ‘direct communication’ (1848-51). This period focuses on the hypocrisy of what Kierkegaard calls ‘Christendom’, the church as it has developed away from what he sees as its true purpose.

The main work that I use from this period is *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, an anomaly in Kierkegaard’s period of direct authorship since it was written under the pseudonym Inter et Inter. It was written in 1847 and published in 1848. It is now published along with Christian Discourses even though that book is written in direct authorship.

I briefly refer to *Works of Love*, a group of essays on the subject of the Christian duty to ‘love thy neighbour as thy self’, published in 1847. Here, Kierkegaard’s poetic insights take themes from the Bible and show what their real meaning is for Christian life. Love, another name for God is unfathomable and mysterious

The Book on Adler, published posthumously, which I mention in relation to Abraham, was written in reaction to the writings of Adolf Peter Adler. Adler was a pastor and teacher of theology who became a great follower of Hegel until, he claimed, he had a revelation from Christ which turned him against Hegelianism.

The Sickness Unto Death was published 1849 under the name of Anti-Climacus and is a companion piece to the *Concept of Anxiety*, and is also a ‘psychological’ work. Here Kierkegaard considers the spiritual aspects of despair. This book is referred to in the section on Michel Henry. The pseudonym ‘Anti-Climacus’ does not mean in

opposition to Johannes, rather the Anti is an old form of 'ante' (before). Unlike Johannes who claims not to be a Christian, this Climacus is a Christian in what Walter Lowrie calls 'a superlative degree'. Kierkegaard did not want to suggest that he thought of himself as such an idealised Christian. Anti-Climacus is also author of *Training in Christianity*.

The third period of Kierkegaard's authorship is called 'The Attack Upon Christendom' (1854-55) where he concentrates on the religious stage of development. I have included no texts from this period. His *Journals and Papers are published* posthumously and I refer to these frequently. Kierkegaard, however, would not have considered that these would be used as an interpretation of his other writings.

other literature (in alphabetical order)

Giorgio Agamben's diverse work elaborates a thinking of 'subjectivity without a subject'. He develops a notion of subjective existence as possibility or potentiality. In my research I have drawn mainly on two works: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1988). and *The Open: Man and animal* (2004).

Étienne Balibar was a pupil of Louis Althusser's and, after Althusser's death, became one of the leading exponents of French Marxist philosophy. Balibar insists that philosophical writing cannot be detached from its specific determinations such as the political, economic and cultural conditions in which it arises, and that indeed these are intrinsic to philosophical activity itself. In this way, he advocates philosophy first and foremost as a 'practice'. In this thesis I only refer to two short, but immensely informative articles, by Balibar: 'Citizen Subject' in Cadava et al *Who Comes After the Subject?* and 'Vocabularies of European Philosophies, Part 1: 'Subject' in *Radical Philosophy*.

No discussion of decision or subjectivity would be complete without Jacques Derrida. I have drawn mainly on his later works, which focus on the paradoxes that afflict concepts such as decision (responsibility, hospitality, forgiving, mourning etc) with 'possible-impossible aporias' where the very condition of possibility becomes the condition of their impossibility. Derrida uses the notion of 'undecidability' to try

to free up thinking from traditional binary oppositions such as presence/absence, subject/object. I directly refer to Derrida mainly in Part One, although his thinking has been instrumental from the beginning of the project. In the thesis, I refer to Derrida several times overtly but *Gift of Death* is the primary reference for Part One.

Michel Henry (who died in 2002) was a philosopher who also produced novels. He came from a phenomenological tradition and developed what he called ‘a phenomenology of life’, or of ‘the invisible’. His philosophy reversed the traditional phenomenological focus on the appearance of things in the world. For him ‘truth’ did not manifest itself exteriorly but was immanent to life lived in radical subjectivity. In this research I examine his thought through and early work *The Essence of Manifestation*, published in 1963.

a few notes on language

I have used terms in the thesis from Greek, French and Danish. Where they are taken from the literature, I have copied them exactly as they appear. The Greek terms, therefore, used in Kierkegaard are written in Greek alphabet as well as English. The Greek terms from Agamben tend to be only in the English alphabet. I have only been able to find the Jean Wahl texts in French, and so have taken the liberty of translating them myself into English.

PART ONE

ABRAHAM

TO THE ROARING WIND

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

Wallace Stevens

Preface

Fear and Trembling, written by Kierkegaard under the name of Johannes de Silencio,¹ retells the biblical story of Abraham. This story has been examined by some of the world's greatest philosophers and discussed in depth by theologians. It is repeated in churches throughout the Christian world to this day.² Like all Old Testament stories it is short, relating all but the starkest of facts. Kierkegaard's 'lyrical' exploration of the parable of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* gives an extensive insight into the nature of faith. For Kierkegaard, the idea of faith cannot be complacently accepted as if it were something that all human beings were capable of. For him, Abraham is the exceptional 'knight of faith', a person that no-one can truly understand.

In this first section of the thesis, *Fear and Trembling*, as well as other Kierkegaard texts, provide a basis for an examination of what the locus of decision could be. Although this text is about faith, what Kierkegaard means by faith seems to be the same as what Derrida means by 'decision'. Abraham's test of faith is also 'decision' of the most radical kind. I then examine how subjectivity can be said to be the 'locus' through which *decision* takes place by exploring Abraham through Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'the exception', as well as his writing on the figure of *homo sacer*.

Finally, I will look at the notion of 'the call', that unfathomable demand from God in response to which Abraham made his decision. The call and Abraham's response of obedience take place inwardly for Kierkegaard in 'radical subjectivity', something which the philosopher Michel Henry has written extensively about. This section ends with a narrative journey through the notion of radical subjectivity through a reading of Henry's *The Essence of Manifestation*.

¹ The name Johannes de Silencio is taken from the Grimm's tale 'Faithful Servant'.

² The story is also important to Jewish faith. Thanks to an acquaintance called Suki, I learned that in Hebrew the story of Abraham speaks of 'the binding' instead of 'sacrifice'. 'Binding' is also a word for composition. In this reading, Isaac is created or made through this story. The word 'knife' also means 'to eat'. A tradition in Jewish faith is the *aggadah*, which refers to non-legalistic texts which are part of Jewish oral law. Also known as *Aggadata* and *Haggadah* (pl. *Haggadot*), the *aggadot* are related in the form of folklore, historical anecdotes, advice and so on and often include mythical creatures, and fantastical historical events. I would like to explore this further elsewhere, but for now this indicates the importance of telling stories in understanding levels of law and theology, in Judaism as elsewhere.

Chapter 1: Leap

the test of Abraham

In the Biblical parable, God told Abraham that he was to be ‘the father of a multitude of nations’. God said to him, ‘I will establish a covenant between me and you and your descendants after you through out their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you’. He told Abraham that he, aged 100 and his wife Sarah, aged 90 will bear a child. The child, a son, was born and they called him Isaac³. Isaac was the first in the line of descendants that God spoke about in his promise to Abraham.

Some time passed and God called Abraham. ‘Here am I’, Abraham replied. God said to him, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you’.

Abraham did what God asked and took Isaac to Moriah. They were travelling with others and after three days and three nights, Abraham took leave of them with Isaac to await Gods’ instructions. When Isaac asked where the sacrificial animal was, Abraham replied only that ‘God will provide’. They arrived at the place on the mountain designated by God and Abraham bound Isaac and raised his knife. At the very moment when he was about to slay Isaac, an angel’s voice told him to stop and turn around. Behind him was a ram. He sacrificed the ram and Abraham and Isaac returned home.

• • •

For Christians, Abraham is the father of faith but faith is not a question of whether God exists or not. That too is a matter of faith, but Abraham already had faith in God. What is in question in Abraham’s story is the nature of faith itself. In the parable, the term ‘faith’ is not mentioned as such. Instead, it describes God’s command as the ‘test’ or ‘temptation’ of Abraham. When Abraham’s ordeal was over, God declared to him ‘by your descendants

³ The biblical source that I use is *Holy Bible and the Apocrypha*, revised Standard Edition, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. 1952. Genesis 22. p.20. Abraham had a son from a previous relationship with a slave woman called Hagar. Sarah asked Abraham to send her away. God tells him to do as Sarah says and he will make a nation of Hagar’s son too. Hagar and her child are cast out into the desert. Abraham’s and Sarah’s names were both changed from Abram to Sarai respectively.

shall all nations of earth bless themselves'. What Abraham did was to decide, against all human comprehension, to do God's will. He makes a *decision* in the most radical sense of the term, perhaps the only sense in which the word 'decision' can accurately be used. Without faith, Abraham would have been incapable of decision.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard holds up Abraham as a figure of both admiration and frustration. He cannot comprehend him. He seeks a contemporary equivalent and hopes that if he can find such a person, he might be able to discover what Abraham was like. He conjures the 'the knight of faith' as a description of such a person and tells of how he sought such a person out. When, finally, he thought that he had found his knight, he looked entirely ordinary, just like 'a tax-collector'. This man, says Kierkegaard, 'takes part in everything' with the appearance of taking life in his stride and enjoying himself thoroughly, 'Carefree as a devil-may-care-good-for nothing, he hasn't a worry in the world', and yet, he says, 'purchases every moment that he lives...'⁴

For Kierkegaard, contemporary Christians cannot simply inherit faith by virtue of being the 'descendants' of Abraham, but must come to it by themselves through their own efforts. Just as faith is not transmissible through lineage, neither is it transmissible through language, learning or any form of communication whatsoever.⁵ When we learn to swim, says Kierkegaard, we can imitate the movements without getting into the water. Then if we are thrown into the water, we can swim in order to save our lives, but not for its own sake. 'I can swim in life', he says, 'but for this mysterious floating I am too heavy.'⁶ What Abraham did was like swimming with no thought of saving himself.

To do as Abraham did is not a simple matter of imitation since, from the outside, there is nothing to see. In order to be like Abraham, I must be prepared to actually do what he did without instruction or corroboration.

In a more recent tale, *A Thief's Journal*, Jean Genet talks of how it is 'impious' for an artist to use crime without having committed the crime themselves:

Someone risks his life, his glory, only to be used as ornament for a dilettante. Even though the hero be imaginary, a living creature inspired him. I refuse to take delight in his sufferings if I have not yet shared them. I shall first incur the scorn of men, their judgement. I distrust the

⁴ S. Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985. pp.68-69.

⁵ 'the one knight of faith simply cannot help another'. Ibid p.99.

⁶ Ibid. p78.

saintliness of Vincent de Paul. He should have been willing to commit the galley-slaves crime instead of merely taking his place in irons.⁷

It would be ludicrous to suggest that Kierkegaard is advocating any act of crime (remember that Isaac was not killed). Nonetheless, what Genet says echoes Kierkegaard; what Abraham went through is greater than any martyr because he had to be prepared to do what God asked of him. He had to, absolutely, and without the slightest hesitation, be ready to kill.⁸

What is so extraordinary is that Abraham is held up as an example for Christianity. His story is told as an inspiration. Kierkegaard brings to attention the fact that a decision made in faith requires a sacrifice of unimaginable proportions. To be prepared to kill his own child is in itself terrible enough, but Abraham was also being asked to sacrifice the future of all of his descendents and their protection in the covenant with God. In effect, he was prepared to sacrifice nothing less than humanity itself, along with its future security and salvation. In order to make such a decision he had to relinquish all grounds of certainty within himself (what reason could justify such a sacrifice?). In his decision there was nothing to rely on, no community of assent, no reassurance and absolutely no predicable outcome. Faith is one thing and if it requires no decision then perhaps it is imaginable to achieve it. A decision, made on the basis of faith, however, is an altogether rarer occurrence. Who is capable of such a thing?

⁷ J. Genet. *The Thief's Journal*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965. p177.

⁸ '[...] the slightest trace of an aber [but], then the beginning miscarries' says Kierkegaard. . S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. p.138 .

the movement of faith

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard gives several alternative versions of Abraham's story and suggests what the outcome would be in each case:

- i. Abraham tells Isaac what God has asked him to do, thereby turning himself into a monster in Isaac's eyes. Abraham loses Isaac before the journey has begun.
- ii. Abraham saw the ram before it is time. He sacrificed the ram and they returned home. He could not forget that God had demanded this of him. *Abraham's eye was darkened. He saw joy no more*
- iii. Abraham thought about the son he had with Hagar the slave woman and how he had cast them both out into the desert. He realised that he had done wrong and was about to do wrong again. He begged God for forgiveness at having even considered killing Isaac. There was no sacrifice.
- iv. Isaac saw his father raising the knife, but Abraham did not realise that he had seen this. Isaac saw the whole thing and lost his faith. He said nothing to Abraham or anyone else.⁹

In any one of these versions, the outcome would not have been a real test of Abraham's faith, that is, his ability to decide against all reason to follow God's command. Kierkegaard asks us to consider the true version - that for three days and three nights Abraham kept silent. He stood by his resolve to do God's will, unable to understand why such a thing was being asked of him and unable to speak about it to anyone. The moment arrived when he had to carry out the sacrifice. He did not know that God would substitute a ram. The ram appeared *neither too early nor too late*.¹⁰ At the very last possible moment, just when it was impossible to turn back, Isaac was saved.

The movement of faith is completed in two stages, says Kierkegaard, but such 'stages' are hardly a logistical progression. Instead, they seem to contradict each other.

The first movement that Abraham makes, says Kierkegaard, is to give up his claim on Isaac in 'infinite resignation'. This is a 'private undertaking [...] something no-one can understand.' Abraham was prepared to sacrifice what was in effect the 'whole world' for him. Right up until the very last possible moment, when the knife was poised ready to fall

⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. pp.45-48.

¹⁰ Ibid. p65

on Isaac, whom he loved then with an intensity greater than ever, he was prepared to do it.

And yet, *he believed that it would not happen*. This belief, that it would not happen, is the second movement of faith. Both of these movements constitute the decision that Abraham made in faith, that is, ‘on the strength of the absurd’.¹¹ However, such a decision is not made once and for all; it must be continuously made in the flux between the ‘infinite resignation’ and the ‘nevertheless it won’t happen’. And, suggests Kierkegaard, if the sacrifice of Isaac does happen, there is another possibility: ‘the Lord will give me a new Isaac’.¹²

What people often mean by faith, says Kierkegaard, is something one needs in order to renounce everything, instead of something which presupposes that one has already renounced everything. Faith requires the sacrifice of that which is loved. This does not mean ceasing to love the beloved, once they have been relinquished, but continuing to love the beloved in our abandonment of them.¹³ If I do not continue to love what I have sacrificed, then there has been no sacrifice. As Derrida, who wrote so beautifully on *Fear and Trembling*, says, ‘If I grant death or put to death that which I hate it is not a sacrifice’.¹⁴ The sacrifice of Isaac, he says, is also the sacrifice of love to love. It is only at the point where Abraham’s act of drawing the knife is ‘in absolute contradiction to his feelings, only then does he sacrifice Isaac.’¹⁵ In effect, Abraham had *already* relinquished Isaac and *already* sacrificed him before the ram appeared. Isaac was at that moment no longer the son of Abraham. The sacrifice had already been made in the decision to obey God, but the act itself, the killing of Isaac, had not yet been enacted. If the ram had not appeared *everything* would have been lost. There would have been no possibility of Abraham retrieving what he had renounced. Instead, Isaac was given back to Abraham on the proper basis, that is, as a gift from God. For Kierkegaard, the good things in life derive their value not from the fact that they exist, but from the source of existence itself. Isaac and all of his descendants were once again restored to the world.

Kierkegaard says of Abraham’s story:

If one imagines one can be moved to faith by considering the outcome of this story, one deceives oneself, and is out to cheat God of faith’s first movement, one is out to suck the life-wisdom out of the paradox. One or another may succeed, for our age does not stop with faith, with its

¹¹ Ibid. p.139.

¹² Ibid. p.139.

¹³ This is precisely what Kierkegaard does when he breaks off the relationship with Regine.

¹⁴ J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p.64.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.65. Here, Derrida quoting an amended translation from his edition of *Fear & Trembling*.

miracle of turning water into wine; it goes further, it turns wine into water.¹⁶

Only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac.¹⁷ Faith is a decision before God, that is in accord with an unfathomable demand. For Kierkegaard, is also a form of madness. In Abraham's case, the decision made in faith also restored faith to him anew. Faith is the outcome of divine, not human, possibility and as such, is unfathomable and unpredictable. However, the decision itself, to carry out what God asked, whilst *at the same time* believing that it would not happen, was Abraham's decision, not God's. The decision itself is humanly possible even if the outcome is not.

there must be anguish...

The 'knight of faith' in *Fear and Trembling* appears content, like someone who has no burden to bear in this world. Despite enduring, one assumes, the same ordeals as any human being, he goes through life with apparent ease. Such an individual seems inviolable, resolute and unperturbed. With an imperceptible effort, he fulfils whatever task is placed before him. Kierkegaard imagines Abraham like this knight and as such it is easy to see why he causes frustration to someone who would like to learn about faith. Nothing of the difficult betrays itself on the surface. However, considering the task that is demanded of Abraham, such a demeanour seems almost monstrous; 'while Abraham arouses my admiration, says Kierkegaard, 'he also appals me.'¹⁸

If Abraham really did effortlessly make his decision to carry out his task in complete unquestioning security, then there is good reason to be appalled. An image that Kierkegaard describes in *Repetition*, comes to mind. The narrator (Constantin Constantius), saw a nursemaid pushing a pram with two children inside. One was fast asleep and the other, wide awake, was taking up most of the space, and, eager to get a good view of what was going on around her, had pushed herself to the front of the pram. A cart suddenly came speeding along and the pram, being in its path, was obviously in danger:

...people ran toward it , and with a swift turn the nursemaid pushed it into a doorway. All the by-standers were apprehensive, I among them. During all this, the little lady sat quite calm and passively kept on picking her nose. Presumably she thought: What does all of this have to do with

¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. p.66.

¹⁷ 'you had to draw the knife before keeping Isaac'. Ibid. p.56.

¹⁸ Ibid p.89

me; it's the nursemaid's business. Such heroism is sought in vain among adults¹⁹

Something in Kierkegaard's description of this child and her absolute trust in her own security suggests an almost grotesque narcissism. If Abraham really did carry out God's command with the calm resoluteness and apparent ease of the 'knight of faith', then this would be one conclusion to reach. A child, however, is un-aware of danger and therefore cannot be courageous. Innocence is also ignorance, but Abraham would have known the dangers. What is missing from the Abraham story, says Kierkegaard, is 'the anguish... Yet anguish is a dangerous affair for the squeamish, so people forget it, notwithstanding they want to talk about Abraham.'²⁰

Imagine you are in one of those rickshaws that have become popular in town.²¹ You are being taken all round the streets amongst pedestrians and busy traffic. What if a car comes veering towards you? Would you stay put, trusting the rickshaw driver to save you? Unless you are quite unusual, this is unlikely to be the case. You know the dangers from past experience and you know the possible outcomes. There is nothing peculiar about fear in the face of danger, what would be unusual is a person who does not try to save themselves.

Abraham knew all the dangers involved in the ordeal he was facing, but he did not retreat. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard asks the reader to imagine what Abraham must have gone through in those three days and three nights. It is possible to imagine his thoughts: How could God ask him to do such a thing? This cannot be the benevolent God that Abraham thought he was. How could he agree to kill his own child? If Isaac ever knew that his father intended to kill him, he would never forgive him. If Sarah knew then he would have been stopped from ever going. He would be branded a murderer or a madman. Thoughts and fears, unimaginable to those who have not undergone what he did (and what person has or who would admit it?), must have passed through Abraham's mind.

Kierkegaard encourages us to understand that Abraham did not accept his task passively in the usual sense of the word. Rather, he actively decided to relinquish all that he had claim to: Isaac, Sarah, his culture, even his own self and his relation with the God who demanded such an unthinkable thing of him. At the point where the knife was poised over Isaac, there would have been no remaining reason, nothing to invoke as an even tenuously reliable

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard. *Repetition*. New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983. p.172.

²⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. p.58.

²¹ In the Soho area of London.

ground for his decision, nothing but the senselessness of total abandonment to an act that still must be done without knowing why.

...and a secret trembling

At the beginning of *Fear and Trembling* in a section called 'Attunement', Kierkegaard tells the story of a man who became increasingly fascinated by Abraham's story as he grew older whilst at the same time finding it harder to understand. He wanted to be there with Abraham when he was alone with Isaac on the mountain. What occupied him, says Kierkegaard, is not the 'fabric of the imagination' but 'the shudder of thought'.²²

How is it possible that Abraham could keep silent? Surely such an ordeal would push anyone to unburden themselves by seeking the counsel of another? However, if Abraham had revealed what he intended to do, there would have been no possibility of making the movement of faith.

At the centre of Abraham's story, then, is silence. Speaking without saying anything is still the best way of keeping a secret, says Derrida, and when Isaac asks where the burnt offering is and Abraham replies, 'God will provide', this is exactly what he is doing.²³ Abraham was guardian of a secret that could not be spoken of, not because he was forbidden to speak of it (nowhere is such an injunction mentioned), but because he did not know what it was. It was also hidden from him. He *could not* speak: 'He can say what he will, but there is one thing he cannot say and since he cannot say it i.e. say it in a way that another understands it, he does not speak.'²⁴ The only possible expression of Abraham's mute anguish is 'the shudder of thought', the trembling in the title of Kierkegaard's book.²⁵ What makes us tremble, says Derrida, is 'The *mysterium tremendum*, the frightful secret'. Why tremble, he asks, and 'what does the body mean to say by trembling, presuming one can speak here of the body, or of saying, of meaning, and of rhetoric?' Trembling, he continues, 'is both

²² S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. p.44 .

²³ J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p.59

²⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. p.137. Concealment and revelation may belong to the sphere of aesthetics, says Kierkegaard: 'at the mere sound of the word "concealment" everyone can easily shake a dozen romances and comedies from his sleeve'. However, what Kierkegaard wants to do is to 'let concealment pass dialectically between aesthetics and ethics, for the point is to show how absolutely different the paradox and aesthetic concealment are from one another'. Ibid. p.111-112.

²⁵ Which Derrida also reminds us is an implicit reference to St Paul where the disciples are addressed by Christ: 'Wherefore my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.' (Derrida quoting Philippians 2:12 from King James Bible) J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995 p.56.

anticipation and a being reminded in such a way that is neither seeing or knowing'.²⁶

For the Christian, humanity became separated from God through their own actions and this separation, which also constitutes an inequality between God and man, is an unbreachable difference which is a source of suffering for both God and man alike. It also constitutes a relation of responsibility; a human duty towards the source of existence and a divine duty towards creation. It is this responsibility towards an unknown, invisible source of existence that makes us tremble, says Derrida:

It is the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn't see what is looking at me; it is the gift and endurance of death that exists in the irreplaceable, the disproportion between the infinite gift and my finitude, responsibility as culpability, sin, salvation. repentance and sacrifice.²⁷

Derrida says that even if we remain 'free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death'²⁸, for Kierkegaard it is ultimately God who *decides for us*. However, as God never shows himself and offers no reliable assurance, any decision that I make must be made as though it were mine and mine alone.

The decision that Abraham made in accord with God's demand is beyond reason; it is in excess of that which can be contained and assimilated by human discourse. The ethical expression, that which can be spoken about, is that Abraham is willing to murder. The religious expression, that which cannot be justified, spoken about or even comprehended is that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham was 'either a murderer or a man of faith.'²⁹ How can Abraham be praised for being a murderer, or in Christian terms, for committing the gravest kind of sin?

If Abraham's decision was made at the level of the ethical alone, the trial of faith would be erased. The 'monstrous paradox'³⁰ that is faith consists in giving oneself over to a demand that is unthinkable in terms of human law or consensus. In being prepared to go through with such a demand and at the same time believing that it will not happen, despite there being no justifiable cause for such a belief, Abraham assumes a responsibility that goes beyond the ethical. The sacrifice of Isaac is then also the sacrifice of 'the ethical'. The ethical, says Kierkegaard, is also the universal and therefore includes the divine:

²⁶ Ibid. p.53.

²⁷ Ibid. p.55-56.

²⁸ Ibid. p.56.

²⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1985. p.60.

³⁰ 'Faith is the monstrous paradox – faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off'. Ibid. p.82.

It is therefore correct to say that all duty is ultimately duty to God; but if one cannot say more one says in effect that really I have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty itself.³¹

The responsibility that Abraham assumes is towards the 'more ethical than ethical', an ethics which includes a duty to one's neighbour, to other human beings but at the same time is a duty towards the unknowable. What is called 'responsibility' cannot be contained by any concept, says Derrida, it has within it an 'essential excessiveness'³². Unlike the laws regulated by concepts, such duty regulates itself through 'the incalculable'. For Derrida, concepts such as responsibility (and decision, hospitality, forgiving, mourning etc) are afflicted by a paradox, the 'possible-impossible aporias' where the very condition of possibility becomes the condition of their impossibility.³³ Abraham's decision assumed responsibility in the way that Derrida describes.

Derrida's writing on *Fear and Trembling* in *The Gift of Death*, is one of many occasions where he ties the concept of responsibility to that of decision. Drawing on Kierkegaard, he says that a decision, if it truly to be called a decision, must be made against the background of undecidability.³⁴

He describes the problem as follows:

However careful one is in the theoretical preparation of a decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense not only must the person taking the decision not know everything... the decision, if there is to be one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated.³⁵

³¹ Ibid. p.96.

³² J. Derrida, "Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in Cadava, E, Connor, P. and Nancy, J.L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.108.

³³ See 'Awaiting (at) the Arrival' in J. Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. California: Stanford University Press, 1993. p.56.

³⁴ Ibid. Derrida often talks of decision in this way for example in 'Perhaps, Maybe', Derrida in conversation with Alex Garcia Duttman, ICA talks, May 8 1996 and *Limited Inc*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990. p.116.

³⁵ J. Derrida, 'Nietzsche and the Machine: Interview with Jacques Derrida' (interviewer Beardsworth). *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 7, Spring 1994. p.37. One of Derrida's primary contributions to philosophy is, of course, *différance*, the endless deferral of meaning which constitutes a ground of knowledge that is provisional, contingent and forever shifting. *Différance* is, according to Derrida, not a concept but rather a temporization or spacing and allows for the inclusion of something unknown and unknowable in the presentation of any object (of thought, signification etc). These unknowns refer to 'past' or 'future' possibilities which are carried with and which trouble the notion of present, presentation and representation.

Derrida uses terms such as ‘undecidable’ or ‘incalculable’, not out of ‘a simple predilection for play nor in order to neutralize decision’, but because, he says ‘on the contrary, I believe there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reduced to calculation, program, causality, and at best “hypothetical imperative”’.³⁶

The ethical that is ‘more than ethics’, and which Kierkegaard proposes as ‘the teleological suspension of the ethical’ in *Fear and Trembling*, is unspeakable in the simple sense that no words can describe it but also because to speak about it dissolves the very responsibility that is intrinsic to it. Ethics, in a general sense, that is an ethics which can be spoken about through human discourse, is in fact, according to Derrida an incitement to ‘irresponsibility.’ Abraham made his decision alone, as an individual and not as a ‘representative’ of (human) law. His silence, says Derrida, assumed, ‘the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one’s own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no-one can die in my place, no-one can make a decision, what we call “a decision”, in my place’³⁷

What if Abraham had spoken about it? What if he had discussed it with Sarah and Isaac? A decision would have been made in the general sense but such a decision *for God* in faith would not have been made. The movement of faith would not have been achieved and Abraham would have lost everything.

Nevertheless, as Derrida points out, at the ‘instant of decision’, two contradictory duties co-exist. Abraham assumed sole responsibility for the sacrifice of his son and in doing so he also sacrificed ethics. At the same time, in order for the sacrifice to take place Abraham’s love for his son must be as strong as ever: the ‘order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights’.³⁸ This is the very condition of his decision; that even as he is on the very point of killing Isaac, Abraham’s commitment to him remains as strong as it ever was. Even though he is about to kill his own son through his own decision, he has not relinquished his love for him and still believes that he will not die.

³⁶ Derrida in Cadava, E, Connor, P. and Nancy, J.L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge. p.108.

³⁷ J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p.60-61.

³⁸ Ibid. p.65.

the moment

The instant of decision was at the very moment when the point of the knife was ready to descend, when it was already too late to retreat. The point of the knife, then, is one image of the decisive moment. Abraham though, had *already decided*. When Abraham answered God with ‘Here I am’, he presented himself ready for action, like a soldier answering a military roll call. It is also as though he is literally pointing himself out, as though he was lost to view and God could not find him until he indicated his whereabouts. He offers himself and, at the very same time, he is summoned. There too, just like the point of the knife, is a decisive moment. Already, there are two moments that can be described as decisive. At what point, then, did the decision definitively take place, if it can be said that it ‘took place’ at all?

The category of the moment is central to Kierkegaard’s thinking (the ‘instant’ says Derrida is always indispensable in Kierkegaard ³⁹) and nowhere more so than in the parable of Abraham. The moment is like the fulcrum on which everything turns. ‘The moment’, says Kierkegaard, is not a determination of time but rather a ‘figurative expression and [...] not easy to deal with. However, it is beautiful word to consider.’⁴⁰

It could be said that in life, each moment takes care of itself and that what ought to be of concern is the whole; the general direction or destination towards which these moments lead. This could be called ‘taking control’, ensuring an advancement towards certain goals in life. If someone does not put themselves at the helm then they will drift along aimlessly, without achievements.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid p.72.

⁴⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p.87.

⁴¹ Tolstoy tells how he was suicidal, feeling that despite his worldly success, life had no meaning. He felt like a person carried along in a boat by the wind and waves, accompanied by other people in boats, all going in the same direction. He, like them, was not asking where he should go but rather only that he be carried along somewhere. Tolstoy decides to turn around and go in another direction (towards faith). (L.Tolstoy. *A Confession and other religious writings*. London: Penguin, 1987.)

Agnes Varda, in her film *Vagabond* tells another story of a young girl found in the French countryside frozen to death in a ditch, wearing filthy clothes, her hair matted. She had no identification. I seemed that she had been drifting for months. The narrator of the story tries to piece together the girl’s history and comes to envisage her as someone who was by all appearances gifted; beautiful, intelligent and charismatic. In the film, we are introduced to people who knew her. One of these is a goatherd and his family. The goatherd has a graduate degree in philosophy. He understands the desire to escape from the demands of the modern world and spent some time drifting himself. This life of tending animals and making his living from the earth rather than from books is his chosen solution. Many of his friends from before are dead through drugs or suicide. The young woman arrives at his farm and together with his wife they offer her accommodation and work. However, she loses interest and sits around smoking and bored, leaving her accommodation unkempt. The goatherd warns her that if she pursues this route of total freedom it will destroy her, ultimately through loneliness. She is a dreamer, he says, without purpose or

For Kierkegaard, however, the moment is significant because it possesses the potential for an irreversible overturning of a life, in other words it is *decisive* in the most radical sense.

In order to investigate what is involved in this category of ‘the moment’ further, I will turn to other texts in which it is explored (and philosophically examined) by Kierkegaard: *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. In these texts, it is possible to see what the significance of ‘the moment’ is for Kierkegaard in Abraham’s decision.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, written under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus,⁴² Kierkegaard is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge. How is it possible to learn something previously unknown? In the Socratic form of teaching, claims Kierkegaard, the teacher is not indebted to pupil and pupil not indebted to teacher. The unequal become equal.

God is also a teacher but, says Kierkegaard, he is not the equal of his pupils, like Socrates. Between God and humanity there lies an unquantifiable gulf so that it is difficult to say how these two entities can even be compared. Not only does God impart knowledge but he also provides the learner with the very conditions for understanding. Such a God needs no pupil to understand himself, as all knowledge is his already.⁴³ There is in fact no necessity for him to teach for his own gain, but there is a profound desire for reconciliation with the learner.

The author Johannes Climacus claims not to be a Christian but, rather, a ‘practicing doubter who becomes a private thinker.’⁴⁴ For him the term ‘God’ is a placeholder for the unfathomable, that which cannot be reasoned, or that at which one arrives when reason runs out:

But what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides and which even disturbs man and his self-

aim. The young woman leaves the goatherds, stealing some cheese to sell on the way. (*Vagabond*. [*Sans Toi Ni Loi*]. Cine Tamaris Films A2.1985)

Both of these characters turned their back on convention and progress. They decided to be individuals. The difference is that although both required tremendous courage the turning around of Tolstoy was towards something (an ambition to develop faith) and thus towards life but the young woman’s choice had no direction at all and ended in death.

⁴² See Introduction of this text for an explanation of the name Johannes Climacus.

⁴³ In *Phaedo*, Socrates proposes the theory that all knowledge is pre-existent either through this or another life. The reference to reincarnation though may have been because Socrates was waiting to be executed and this allusion may have been a way to console his friends.

⁴⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.xiv [Introduction by Hong]

knowledge? It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man, or anything else that he knows. Therefore, let us call this unknown *the god*. It is only a name we give to it. ⁴⁵

The Socratic view holds that the learner merely needs to be reminded in order to call to mind, by himself, what he already knows. However, for Kierkegaard, this view allows the actual occasion for learning to be forgotten; it becomes a 'vanishing moment'. For the moment to have decisive significance, it must never be forgotten 'because the eternal, previously non-existent, came into existence... in that moment.'⁴⁶ The eternal, in this sense, is not only infinite temporality but also infinite possibility which presents itself in the moment.⁴⁷

The first pre-requisite for a decisive occasion for learning, for Kierkegaard, is that the teacher must be God (the 'unknown something'). The individual must also *already* be a learner, that is one in whom there is a total absence of truth (even, as Kierkegaard notes, in its negative form of ignorance) to the extent that they are not even a seeker. The learner is defined by Kierkegaard as 'untruth', another word for 'sin', which also means 'to be in error'. The condition for understanding is given by God who 'creates' the learner. However, the learner did originally possess this condition, which was granted by God and lost it, not by accident nor because it was taken away by God (this would be a contradiction, since he originally imparted it), but because through sin, the learner willed their own exclusion from truth. They engendered their own 'unfreedom', as Kierkegaard puts it. Even though the learner willed their own 'unfreedom', they cannot use the same will to reverse the process. 'Unfreedom', says Kierkegaard, is like a toy bought by a child who then wants to take it to a bookshop to exchange it for a book. The toy, once it has been bought, becomes worthless as a means of purchasing what he wants. In the same way, 'unfreedom' once it has been 'purchased' loses all value immediately. Only God can return freedom to the learner. ⁴⁸

For Kierkegaard, it is love, not power, that is the basis for the authority that God assumes over human beings. The learner owes God everything but God cannot reveal himself as the teacher, since he would also reveal an intransigent inequality, something which extinguishes the possibility of love. God does not want to see humanity separated from him in the suffering of existence but yearns for reconciliation. However, he cannot save humanity

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.39

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.13

⁴⁷ Thanks to Howard Caygill for making this point.

⁴⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp.13-15.

from themselves. The only way for the learner to be saved is by his or her own actions in the freedom bestowed on them by a God. Such freedom must appear to them as their own and God can never reveal that it is he who bestowed it to them or he who wishes them to use it. ‘Who grasps this contradiction of sorrow; not to reveal oneself is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved.’⁴⁹

The workings of the god-teacher are mysterious and unfathomable. Nevertheless, the learner, in order to receive the teaching of God, must apply themselves to their task of life absolutely without expectation of anything but what their own efforts will bring them. It is like the story of the magic lamp, to which Kierkegaard refers: ‘freedom’, he says, ‘is the wonderful lamp. When a person rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into existence for him’⁵⁰

a place and a time

Just as the moment of decision for Abraham cannot be located at any one time or place, it is impossible to say when or where the decisive moment or the occasion for learning might occur. To try to locate it at all would suggest something fixed, immovable and *locatable*. It may be helpful instead to imagine the moment of decision as a locus, something like a geometrical point of intersection or a point in time in which a number of events coincide.

All of the moments that comprise a life are just like a geometrical locus where the time and place of decision intersect. Each moment arises from an infinite web of connections and paths which have all *been decided* by someone or something at some time. Who knows where the origin of those paths lie? From the point of view of here and now, none of them form a straight or uninterrupted line; each one becomes bifurcated, scattered in a web of causation and coincidence as they dissolve into the horizon.

The ‘here and now’, this moment in time, is not suspended in time or space but forms a continuous flow as it is replaced by the next and so on *ad infinitum*. This incalculable series of substitutions can be called movement or the passing of time. The question is that if

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.30

⁵⁰ S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. p138. This ‘ethical passion’ is reminiscent of the quality that God wished Jesus to have in his human life. God created Jesus, says Kierkegaard, who was a human being endowed with ‘capacities unmatched by all others’, and placed him in a remote spot and said to him, ‘Now go and live the human life though with a strenuousness unmatched by all others ... you shall be enthusiastic, because this is the highest’. Ibid. p.137.

movement actually occurs, is there a thread of continuity between moments or are they instead discreet and unconnected points? The category of ‘the moment’ invites contradiction and as such was the subject of great interest to the ancient Greeks. For Kierkegaard, it was also of extreme significance since his view of ‘learning’ was not as an accumulation or amassing of knowledge in time, but the discovery of something totally new. As such, the moment was, for Kierkegaard, a break in continuity. If the moment is both decisive but also a break in continuity, then it falls out of the flow of time. How would a movement of any kind (including that of the movement of faith) come about?

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard examines (under the name of Vigilius Haufniensis), in extensive footnotes as well as the main body of the text, the theories of movement proposed by the Greeks, notably the Eleatics. Zeno, a thinker for whom of riddles and paradoxes were central, was part of this group. What is known as ‘Zeno’s paradox’ is a theory which held that motion is impossible. In order to travel from point A to point B, a person must pass through a midpoint X to get there. However, in order to get to X he must pass through a midpoint between A and X and so on *ad infinitum*. Motion is therefore an illusion as we are always simply at a static point.

For Kierkegaard, however, ‘the moment’ in its decisive potential is, as has been noted, instrumental, in that it provided the *momentum* for change. The ancient philosophers were also concerned with ‘the moment’ as a category of transition. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard describes how the paradoxical nature of ‘the moment’ was considered by Plato, for example in *Parmenides*, a dialogue in which he aims not to resolve the contradictions ‘inherent in the concept of the moment’, but rather to make them clear.

For the Greeks ‘the moment’ was considered as a category of ‘non-being’ in relation to time. Non-being, the Greek term for which is το κενος (meaning empty, literally or figuratively, or in vain), was of great interest to philosophy both modern and ancient, says Kierkegaard. The philosophical emphasis on bringing non-being into being, makes it seem easy to ‘do away’ with non-being. However, he says, ‘Christians take the view that non-being is present everywhere as the nothing out of which everything is created.’ Plato, says Kierkegaard, shows how the moment ‘is related to the transition of the one to the many of the many to the one, of likeness to unlikeness and that it is the moment in which there is neither εν [one] nor πολλα [many], neither a being determined nor a being combined.’⁵¹

⁵¹ S. Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p83 fn.

The moment, as this category of transition, is nothing in itself but rather like a vessel through which change occurs. 'The moment', here, starts to appear like a non-concept or category. It is no longer possible to say when it occurs, if indeed it 'occurs' as such, at all. Its paradoxical nature means that the present, 'the presence', which supposedly comes to be in the here and now, in fact never arrives. The moment as a vanishing point is like the point X in Zeno's paradox which lies 'between motion and rest without occupying any time, and into this and out from this that which is in motion changes into rest, and that which is at rest changes into motion'. It is best described by the Greek term *ατοπον* meaning 'that which has no place', which is also the 'now':

The 'now'[*τῶνον*] lies between 'was' and 'will come' and naturally 'the one' cannot, in passing from the past to the future, bypass this 'now'. It comes to a halt in the now, does not become older but is older. In most recent philosophy, abstraction culminates in pure being, but pure being is the most abstract expression for eternity, and again as 'nothing' it is precisely the moment.⁵²

For Kierkegaard, the moment, as paradox, is distinguished by its transformative or decisive potential, that is its capacity for conversion. The paradox is not simply a conundrum which eventually, using the correct methodology and correct thinking, can be resolved. Rather, it is like a hole in the universe which allows you step into a parallel world; a world which may look the same as before but which is qualitatively different.⁵³

The moment, as paradox, an assault on reason, is precisely the 'foolishness' that Kierkegaard talks about in *Philosophical Fragments*. The instant of decision for Abraham was rooted in such folly.⁵⁴

'The moment' in Abraham's story also appears to be exactly this transitional (non) category of the Greeks and which was described by Kierkegaard as having decisive significance. It

⁵² The section on Plato is a paraphrase of Kierkegaard's footnote in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Ibid pp.82 - 84. All Greek terms are taken from Kierkegaard and referenced through Strong's dictionary <http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/STRGRK51.htm>

⁵³ There you stand without history, name or identity; as clean a slate as you can get. This metaphor must stop here though! In Kierkegaard's transition I remain in the same world, appear the same and am in exactly the same situation. I am not let off the hook from my earthly duties. The transformation occurs invisibly, on the inside. What is called 'the fall' of man is a qualitative leap. The temptation Adam by the serpent was also an indirect temptation of God and changed the relation between God and Man. Since Adam and Eve's sin was to succumb to the sensuous, then the moment Adam became man, he also became animal. The serpent is also the symbol of language and knowledge and thus allowed Adam to understand the nature of this change and his own responsibility in bringing it about. See S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. p.222.

⁵⁴ 'and the moment of decision is foolishness'. S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.52.

brings about a renewed understanding or perspective in the re-institution of faith for Abraham, and is therefore an occasion for learning for Abraham.

However, the question of when this moment, the occasion for learning, occurs exactly is still less than clear. The instant of Abraham's decision was over in the *twinkling of an eye* and yet it endured (and he endured it) over a period of three days and three nights. When Abraham announced 'Here am I', even before he knows what God will ask of him, he opened himself to the demand. At that moment is the knife already drawn? At that moment, even before the demand is made, who or what was it that decided? Was it Abraham, the man, who is called or some other (someone or something?) who preceded him, who (or which) was Abraham and at the same time not yet Abraham, the 'father of faith'? One thing remains certain, the decision had already been made in advance of the demand but the anguish had not been lived and it is the anguish that Abraham assumes responsibility, in his saying 'yes'.⁵⁵

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard says:

Nothing is as swift as a blink of the eye, yet it is commensurable with the content of the eternal...a sigh, a word, etc. have power to relieve the soul of the burdensome weight, precisely because the burden, when merely expressed, already begins to become something of the past. A blink is therefore a designation of time, but mark well, of time in the fateful conflict when it is touched by eternity. What we call the moment, Plato calls το εξαίφνης [the sudden]... it is related to the category of the invisible... The Latin term is momentum (from *movere* [to move]), which by derivation expresses the merely vanishing.⁵⁶

So this point, the moment, erupts suddenly in time and just as suddenly it vanishes. There seem to be at least two such moments in Abraham's story: the moment when he presented himself before God to hear His command with the 'Here I am' and the moment when he drew the knife. For him, however, it had to be *precisely the right moment*, the one moment, *neither too early nor too late*, that made the decision in faith possible. If 'a blink of the eye...is commensurable with the content of the eternal', is it at all possible to say at what point the 'fateful conflict' occurred for Abraham?

⁵⁵ Derrida speaks of the 'yes, yes', which responds before the question is asked, 'that which is responsible without autonomy, before and in view of all possible autonomy of the who-subject...the relation to self, in this situation can only be *différance*'. Derrida in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. (eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.100

⁵⁶ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981 p.87. It is also a reference to St Paul who said that 'the world will pass in the twinkling of an eye' in *The Concept of Anxiety*. P.88

What if those two moments of Abraham's were not two discreet points separated by three days and three nights? Abraham's announcement, 'Here I am' and the drawing of the knife are perhaps the same simultaneous decision; the decision itself seems to be like a vortex in which all logical separation dissolves and into which everything collapses including Abraham himself as a discrete subjective agency. The moment itself drops out of time and as such cannot be thought of as a temporal 'category'. The decisive moment, like one of Derrida's 'possible-impossible aporias', was the point where decision was both necessary and yet impossible and as such an impasse that could not be negotiated through reason.

The idea of 'locus' then, seems an appropriate term to describe the moment at which decision 'occurs'. Locus in mathematics is point of intersection or overlapping of lines. It is easy to imagine Abraham's ordeal like that geometrical locus, which, instead of being the point where a few lines intersect, took place in an infinite mesh of coincidence; the whole content of eternity presented itself there. Mathematics offers another useful way of conceptualising such a locus. Topology proposes 'the hairy dog theory': if you comb all the hairs on a dog (or a human head) in one direction there will be a point at which there is no hair at all – the parting. This parting is not linear but can be defined by its perimeter as a kind of point or circle perhaps. The area itself is empty (no hairs grow here) and exposed. This theory also describes the way in which the direction of winds as they move round the earth form a kind of 'parting'; at this point there will be a cyclone.⁵⁷ It is easy to imagine the place at which Abraham's decision occurred as the place in which the cyclone occurs; an overwhelming chaos of anguish and confusion. Both of these models, in their own way, describe the place from which Abraham makes his movement of faith.⁵⁸ Yet, an infinitesimal speck of clarity resounded in that throng: the 'yes' which presided at every stage of his ordeal.

decidere

The English verb 'to decide' comes from the Latin, *decidere*, with *de-* meaning 'off' and *caedere* 'to cut'. In Abraham's moment of decision it is as though all routes on the plane of comprehension, the 'horizontal' plane are already cut. He could have been paralysed or forced to retreat but instead, in his decision, he made a movement of faith, a movement that Kierkegaard calls 'the leap'. Abraham's leap was like a cut on the vertical plane, a jump up

⁵⁷ Stewart, Iain. *Concepts of Modern Mathematics*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981. pp.156-158

⁵⁸ if it can be called a 'place'. What word is there to describe something which has no temporal geographical location as such?

(or down) out of that place onto another level of existence altogether.⁵⁹ Decision, then is also a sacrifice, it is the putting to death of human possibility for a reward that exceeds any earthly compensation.

Does decision comprise of more than one cut? Abraham's decision was made in anticipation of the unknown demand of God. Later, he also decided when he was on the verge of killing Isaac. Both of these moments effected a transformation that, for Kierkegaard, is the outcome of Abraham's leap. It was an irrevocable turning around, a conversion that put everything in its rightful place once more, man in relation to God and Isaac in relation to Abraham.

This leap of Abraham's may have felt endless to him, as he lived it. In one sense, it seems to span the whole length of his journey - from the moment God called him to the moment where the ram appeared. At the same time it is like that 'blink of an eye'; from the point of view of eternity it is over in a flash but from the point of view of subjectivity it is lived as a lifetime.

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For Kierkegaard (and also in Derrida's terms), there is no explanation that can adequately define how Abraham was capable of his decision, made in that leap of faith. Speculative philosophy, in trying to give explanations to such things, according to Kierkegaard, only attempts in vain 'to whistle with a mouth full of crackers'. In trying *to explain*, it actually denies the full meaning of whatever is being reflected upon. Kierkegaard states that all decision is 'rooted in subjectivity'.⁶⁰ If subjectivity as existence is by definition *not yet finished*, then how can anything be said conclusively about it? When truth appears it presents itself in the form of the paradox says Kierkegaard, which 'emerges from the placing together of the eternal and existing human being.' If an explanation seeks to remove the paradox then, asks Kierkegaard, does it 'also remove existing from the existing person?'⁶¹

⁵⁹ Thanks to Howard Caygill for the horizontal and vertical metaphor. Kierkegaard is not the first to think of faith in terms of a 'leap'. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) who influenced Kierkegaard also referred to it as such.

⁶⁰ S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. p.129.

⁶¹ 'Here it is not forgotten, even for a single moment, that the subject is existing, and that existing is a becoming, and that truth as the identity of thought and being is therefore a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing of creation, not because truth is not an identity, but because the knower is an existing person, and thus truth cannot be an identity for him as long as he exists' Ibid. pp. 196-197.

In the same way, in order to explain what is decisive, says Kierkegaard, means to ‘to transform the expression into a rhetorical locution’ which, although not overtly denying the possibility of decision, relativises it and as such only ‘assumes it only to a certain degree’. This, in effect, he says, is a denial of decision:

Decision is designed specifically to put an end to that perpetual prattle about “to a certain degree”. So the decision is assumed – but, lo and behold, assumed only to a certain degree. Speculative thought is not afraid to use expressions of decision; the only thing it fears is thinking something decisive with them.⁶²

Speculative thought does not explain but ‘corrects’ and such correcting imposes the limits of reason on the object of thought. It is possible that another kind of ‘explanation’ can be given, one which simply makes clear in what the paradox consists without trying to reduce, relativise or categorise it. This kind of explanation is what Kierkegaard attempts to do.

If I try to explain something according to a preconceived model, then some thought which contradicts my hypothesis is bound to come along, something may occur to me which means that I reach an impasse. I might double back on myself to check if somewhere along the way, I took a wrong turning, or, I might stay in the impasse trying to work through the contradiction. Once I have done so, I can go on my way. A line of thought is a beautiful thing and enjoyable for the thinker. There is nothing wrong with wanting to preserve linearity if what it traces are mere abstractions - fantasies of order and purity. What concerned Kierkegaard, however, was not pure abstract thought, but life as a living project. Life is full of interruptions. The problem with some philosophers, says Kierkegaard, is that they deceive themselves by ignoring contradictions that present themselves in life. They try to place themselves outside or above existence. Instead of being ‘players’, he says, they are merely score keepers.⁶³

nothing happened

What was the outcome of Abraham’s ordeal? For Kierkegaard, there was an irrevocable transformation in Abraham. On the face of it though, nothing happened. Decision in the sense that I am using the term, after Derrida and in relation to what Kierkegaard calls faith, is precisely based on this absence of a quantifiable outcome. That is not to say that there is no outcome at all. For Abraham’s trial to succeed it would have to appear from the outside,

⁶² Ibid. pp. 221-222.

⁶³ Here he is discussing German philosophy, which he says has ‘no players’. The game he is using as an analogy is a sharpshooting contest, which it would put the player in some danger. S. Kierkegaard. *Papers and Journals : A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. [42 III B 192] p.148.

like a commonplace event: the sacrifice of an animal. From the point of view of Abraham, however, his 'private undertaking' put him through an ordeal which transformed him absolutely. Although he drew the knife, he did not kill Isaac; instead he sacrificed Isaac by wholly renouncing him whilst continuing to love him. Sacrifice, says Kierkegaard is 'to give away something of value in the interest of a higher value'.⁶⁴ Abraham received Isaac again and 'the whole world' (his ancestry) on the proper basis, that is as a gift from God. God gave Isaac back to Abraham as though for the first time. Abraham was turned around once more towards God and his faith was renewed.

In that leap, in a decisive movement which appeared to draw everything together beyond the categories of time and space, in a coincidence of the infinite and the finite, man and God, in that blink of an eye, it happened. Abraham's 'Here am I', his 'God will provide', God's command and the voice of the angel all sounded at once. The leap is a difficult thing to arrive at, and involves all of the anguish I have spoken about, and more, but the movement itself is like rubbing that magic lamp. All of a sudden, everything appears as usual.

Abraham's decision was a renewal of faith to such a degree that it was as though it had been brought into existence for the very first time. How this came about is not something that can be explained or taught. Decision made on the basis of faith ('the absurd'), has no observable outcome and can only be made subjectively. I cannot learn how to make such decision. Faith is neither transmissible through the reading of the Gospels or any kind of intellectual examination whatsoever.

In this chapter, I have not tried to explain decision but rather to trace its movement, to chart the territory of decision in terms of the moment, the locus or the point at which decision takes place. It has become apparent that the question of decision as I wish to explore it is intimately bound up with the category of faith, in the way that Kierkegaard thinks of it. Indeed decision must be, if Derrida is right, a movement which, like faith, is based on an unknowable ground of subjective existence; an existence which is not yet finished and therefore not objectively definable as long as I live. The leap of faith is like an instrument of decision, a very particular tool that makes decision in the most radical sense possible.

⁶⁴ S. Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985. p.21.

Chapter 2: Exception

Abraham was without doubt exceptional and yet he is held up as an example. The previous chapter made clear the extraordinary nature of Abraham's decision. In this chapter, I will extend the notion of 'locus' of decision by looking at Abraham himself as the decisive agency. If the leap of faith is the 'instrument' of decision then the subject is the 'thing which leaps', a catalyst through which decision is effected. As such, Abraham as subject, is another element in what I have called a 'locus' of decision. In the last chapter, the moment was seen to be non-categorizable in terms of the 'place' or 'time' of decision. In this chapter I will look at Giorgio Agamben's writing on 'the exception' and '*homo sacer*', both of which help to give form to Abraham as the subject through which decision takes place. Agamben's categories also help to show that Abraham as subject is also, like the moment, in the realm of the uncategorizable.

who is sacred?

In the same way that the concept of decision cannot be 'explained' except by leaving out the inexplicable, so too it would be hopeless to try to explain Abraham in terms of any philosophical model without first editing out his contradictions. However, another historical individual resonates with Abraham and might go some way towards if not 'explaining', then at least reconfiguring him and giving him some kind of earthly context. That individual is *homo sacer*.

Giorgio Agamben, in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* uses Carl Schmitt's writing on sovereign decision as 'he who decides on the state of exception' as a key reference points. The sovereign is at the same time outside and inside the law. He (as it was a 'he') has the legal power to suspend the law, thereby placing himself outside. The paradox lies in the fact that, as Agamben says, this placing oneself outside the law means 'I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law'. The sovereign's status in which he excludes himself from the absolute rules which he imposes on others constitutes the notion of 'the exception', something which Agamben sets

out to examine in his book. He also links the notion of sovereignty to power over 'bare life'.⁶⁵

At the beginning of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben claims that we tend to think of the political realm as being where the rights of citizens, free will and social contracts are upheld. However, he says, from the point of view of sovereignty only 'bare life' is authentically political. What distinguishes us as human beings rather than simply living beings had already been thought through by Aristotle. A living being who has a political life is *human*, as is one who has language. Agamben reminds us that the Greeks had no single term to describe 'life'. The simple fact of living common to all living beings was called *zoë*, which, says Agamben, has no plural. The means of livelihood or way of living particular to an individual or group was *bios* (literally 'life' but also 'the present state of existence'). In the classical world the city, *polis*, the public sphere was where a particular way of life was upheld, the life of *polites*, the citizen. Natural life, (*bios*) is something which became excluded from *polis*.⁶⁶

What Agamben asks us to look at in *Homo Sacer*, is a life which occupies neither the territory of political *bios* nor that of natural *zoë*, but rather what he calls a 'zone of indistinction': the sacred. The first time 'sacredness is tied to a human life', he says, is in the treatise by *Pompeius Vestus* called 'On the Significance of words' under the title of *sacer mons (homo sacer)*. The most ancient form of capital punishment, Agamben says, is not the putting to death of someone for a crime but the purification rite. In the purification rite the sacred man was seen as 'bad' or 'impure' and stripped of his status as a 'person'. Usually the act of consecration changes the status of an object from profane to sacred. *Homo sacer* however, is 'simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law'. To destroy a sacred object would normally constitute sacrilege

⁶⁵ See G. Agamben. *State of Exception*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p.1. Agamben states in *Homo Sacer* that Carl Schmitt's notion of decision owes much to 'a theologian' (who, Agamben notes is Kierkegaard). G. Agamben. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998.p.16

⁶⁶ I have not included these terms in the Greek alphabet as Agamben does not cite them as such and I am not confident that I could translate them accurately.

In Greek thought there also emerged another interesting and related distinction, that between *nomos* (the law) and *physis* (nature): rationalism against chaos. Before the gods there was chaos, and the gods came to bring order to the world. Things were divided as being on the side of *nomos* or the side of *physis*. Women in general tend to be (in the Greek male view) on the side of *physis*, controlled by nature, the uterus. They were hysterical (The snake-woman Medusa). Men are generally on the side of *nomos*, making and obeying laws (The god Apollo was the representative of *nomos* even among the gods; fighting dragons and sea monsters). I have put this information together from a variety of sources.

and was illegal, but in this case it was legal to kill *homo sacer*. What distinguishes *homo sacer* is that he can be killed with impunity but not sacrificed:

Just as the law, in the sovereign exception, applies to the exceptional case in no longer applying and in withdrawing from it, so *homo sacer* belongs to God in the form on unsacrificeability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed. *Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life* ⁶⁷

‘What is the life of the *homo sacer*’ asks Agamben, ‘if it is situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law?’⁶⁸

If classical politics comes about through the separation of the two spheres, *bios* and *zoë*, then the life of *homo sacer*, ‘is the hinge on which each sphere is articulated and the threshold at which the two are joined in becoming indeterminable’. The peculiar status of sacred life is that it occupies neither sphere but at the same time belongs to both spheres. It is, says Agamben, situated in that ‘zone of indistinction in which *zoë* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other’. *Homo sacer* is not protected from any recognised forms of divine or human law and as such is exposed to a violence which ‘opens a sphere of human action that is neither the sphere of *sacrum facere* nor that of profane action.’⁶⁹

In a sense, the status of *homo sacer* is not as unusual as it might seem. In ancient Rome, a father has the right to kill his son with impunity. This power, bestowed on the father, contradicted the principles in Roman law which forbade that a citizen be put to death without trial.⁷⁰

The intricacies of Roman law, its implications for contemporary life and the complex set of relations that Agamben discusses are too much for this discussion and cannot be done justice to here.⁷¹ However, what has been briefly touched upon may help to imagine Abraham, not merely as an abstract concept or mythical being but, through the category of *homo sacer* and the exception, as someone living in a social and political context.

Whilst *homo sacer* is not the same as Abraham, or subject to the same laws, divine or human, Abraham’s peculiar situation seems to echo his. Like Abraham, it is difficult to

⁶⁷ G. Agamben. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p.82.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.73.

⁶⁹ Agamben does not translate *sacrum facere* but in this context it is clear that the meaning must be something like ‘the sacred’ or ‘that which is under the law of the sacred’. G. Agamben. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p.83.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.89.

⁷¹ Although Roman law will appear again in Part Two.

imagine how *homo sacer* would appear in the world. Presumably, if he were subject to being killed with impunity then he would not be protected by the walls of a prison but would be living amongst the population. Would he be set apart by his appearance, his apparel or some mark on his person, in an open invitation to brutality? Or, would he appear like a poor man (it is hard to believe that he would have the means to live well) going about his business? I imagine a person, of which there are so many in cities to this day, whom one would not notice, not for the fact that there are so many other people, but because of that kind of averted posture and deflecting gaze which renders them invisible. Sometimes, it is also the vulnerability of a person that makes one look away. Either might have been the case of *homo sacer*.⁷²

It is difficult to envisage such historical and enigmatic characters such as Abraham and *homo sacer*. However, it is possible to see that it may not only have been Abraham but Isaac too who appear to inhabit that ‘zone of indistinction’ where some human beings ‘belong’ (indeed Agamben’s question becomes: Do we not all belong there?). At the same time, they become indistinguishable one from the other. Father and son, both exceptions, take on the shape of that sacred man.

Abraham is paraded as an example for Christians: ‘the father of faith’ Kierkegaard’s rendition of him in *Fear and Trembling* presents him as unfathomable and the idea of doing as he did as an absurdity. How, then, can Abraham be an example for any human being? Abraham is an example but he is also an exception. The exception is also the example, says Agamben.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben describes both the relation and the distinction between these two states. The example belongs to a class of entities. By virtue of being selected or showing itself to belong to that class, however, it must step out of it ‘in the very moment in which it exhibits its own belonging’. The example then, both belongs and no longer belongs to the class. If, says Agamben, one had to say whether the rule that applied to the class also applied to the example, the answer would be far from straight-forward. The rule applies to the example only if it is a ‘normal case’ in the class. Its status as ‘the example’ excludes it from being a ‘normal case’. The example is ‘excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it.’ It is ‘*exclusive inclusion*’.

⁷² None of this is said in Agamben. I am just trying to put a form to the name.

By contrast, the exception is included in the normal case by virtue of not belonging to it. This is because non-belonging to a class can only be demonstrated from within the class. At the same time since it is immune from the general rule, it is a kind of exclusion. However, it still maintains a relation to the rule in that the rule ‘*applies to the exception in no longer applying , in withdrawing from it*’. So the exception is not ‘simply excluded’, says Agamben, but ‘*taken outside (ex-capere)*’. The exception ‘serves to include what is excluded’ and as such is ‘*inclusive exclusion*’

‘In any logical system, just as in every social system, the relation between outside and inside, strangeness and intimacy, is this complicated’, says Agamben.⁷³

Of course ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ as figures of speech are useful only to conceptualise a sphere in terms of its most general boundaries, much in way that ‘before’ and ‘after’ can delineate a temporality of the ‘now’. Such terms are of little use in helping to think the question of this threshold category which Agamben calls ‘the exception’, either conceptually or as a lived reality. Agamben’s interrogation of the terms ‘example’ and ‘exception’ show just how difficult it is to fully comprehend the ‘zone of indistinction’ in which *homo sacer* finds himself situated, and in which by extension, all of us may find ourselves, when subject to the *law*, the command of God or the mechanism of decision.

What does this tell us about Abraham? Abraham as both the *not yet* Abraham (the one who said ‘yes’) and the *no longer* Abraham (the one who drew the knife), in the moment of decision, no longer belonged to the social or ethical order of things. He was no longer in possession of himself. He was an exception since, by being willing to kill his own offspring, he took himself outside of humanity: what he knew himself to be capable of was in excess of what might be called human. At the same time, he was an example: he remained profoundly human in that he continuing to love Isaac and showed his belonging to the class of humans through his suffering. At that moment of decision as both example and exception, he was uniquely uncategorizable.

Man, says Kierkegaard, is a synthesis of psyche and body, the third term of which is spirit. Man is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, ‘the third term’ in this case being the present (which is also the eternal and which exists in that paradoxical moment)⁷⁴ Abraham, according to Derrida is also a synthesis of ‘the most moral and most immoral, the

⁷³ G. Agamben. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p.17 & pp. 21-22.

⁷⁴ S..Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.p.85.

most responsible and the most irresponsible.’⁷⁵ The ‘third term’ of Derrida’s synthesis could be thought of as Abraham’s decision, effected in faith, in absolute responsibility (the responsibility which is in excess of responsibility) and in the moment. Abraham, as subjective agency, was the ground of a decision which was, at the same time, a synthesis of categories (that is, as Derrida says, the ground in which the moral, immoral and so on coincide) and a cutting away from those categories to which he ‘belonged’.

Abraham, like *homo sacer*, had the shape of a man, but it is difficult to think of him as a human being in the usual sense of the term. Thus, what emerges in the figure of Abraham, through Agamben’s model of the exception is Abraham as a paradox. In effect, it is no less than the kind of ‘synthesis’ which Kierkegaard proposes as the reality of any human existence. Such a synthesis is not a resolution but rather a kind of holding together of contradictions. Through Abraham the paradox moves, as if he too is ‘the now’, *ατοπον*, ‘that which has no place’ and like the state of exception is unlocalizable.⁷⁶

an example

The liminal space of exception opened up through *homo sacer* is an exploration of the limits of decidability not as an abstract concept but as lived through the subject. The life which occupies this territory exists at the threshold of categories designates some life as worthy of the rights and protections of the ‘human’ or the ‘person’ and others as having the status of a ‘thing’. At what point does a human being cease to be a human and become a ‘thing’? The living being is not only subject to such decision but lives it out in as embodied existence. Whether all such beings can be said to live it out *subjectively* is what is in question here. To have subjectivity, to be subject is also a designation of ‘humanity’. Those who occupy the category of the exception are denied such a clear status.

Kierkegaard’s emphasis is always on the subjective; all knowledge, all understanding, all external law and conventions are appropriated subjectively. What then of Abraham’s subjectivity? This category of the exception, as I have said, is also what Kierkegaard calls the paradox that is human existence. Subjectivity, then, is not something that can be ‘designated’ as a fixed category as such. It is rather like the point at which all external (and often contradictory) categories of life coincide: the biological, social, political, legal and so on.

⁷⁵ J. Derrida. *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995.p.71.

⁷⁶ The state of exception is unlocalizable, says Agamben. See G. Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p.19 .

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben explores the way in which the status of human life is decided in another context. Here he questions the privileged status of ‘the human’ over ‘the animal’ and examines the spaces which constitute that difference (in the spheres of the medical, social, ethical, political, legal and so on). Agamben looks at states of life which seem to exist on the borderline, or *the caesura*, which he calls ‘bare life’. The book uses Heidegger’s examination of animality which is in itself a response to the poem by Rilke, *The Eighth Duino Elegy*. He describes the problem that Heidegger draws attention to as follows:

Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human.⁷⁷

Jean-Luc Nancy asks whether the way in which Heidegger talks of animality could be thought of as a ‘sadness’ of the human at being ‘deprived of truth’.⁷⁸ Such deprivation is also that of freedom.

The questions that Agamben raises all require decisions (again medical, social, political, legal and so on) made on behalf of myself or another. In terms of such decisions, says Derrida, ‘We know less than ever where to cut’.⁷⁹ The problem once more comes back to agency; who chooses to or is ordained to decide?

⁷⁷ G. Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open; Man and Animal*. California: Stanford University Press, 2004. p70

⁷⁸ See Derrida in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.111.

⁷⁹ Derrida is reflecting on a similar problem to Agamben Ibid. p117.

discussion with Elena Carnell and Anthony McElville, November 2004

In order to take this discussion further, I would ask you to now play the DVD entitled ‘discussion with Elena Carnell and Anthony McElville, November 2004’. It is a recording of a conversation between two speakers at a public symposium on art and philosophy that I helped to organise. The DVD is attached to the back cover of this document. The quality of the sound is slightly faint at first and I must apologise for this. However, there is a transcript of the discussion in Supplement 1.⁸⁰

At the beginning of the recording is my introduction and since it is very faint, I will give the background to the discussion here. In my introduction I was explaining that initially I had invited Anthony McElville (philosopher) and Vanessa Brooks (artist and writer) to participate at the conference in an ‘in conversation’ format. We decided to use this quote as from *Repetition* as a starting point for their discussion:

Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules...How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager. To whom shall I make my complaint?⁸¹

Vanessa Brooks, however, had to cancel at the very last minute. Fortunately, an academic called Elena Carnell made herself known to me and generously volunteered to take Vanessa's place. She is Professor in Philosophy of Science at University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Anthony McElville is Reader in Philosophy and Aesthetics at Vanderbilt University. His work traverses various disciplines including anthropology, politics and cultural history. *Crossing the Line: animal life from Spinoza to Deleuze* (1997, Suny series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy and more recently *Creating the Human: art, brutality, modernism*, Stanford University Press).

Please play the DVD now. The running time is approximately 38 minutes. When you have finished watching the DVD, I would suggest reading the Supplement on p119 before resuming your reading of this text. I have put a coloured dot at the top of the page so that you can find your place again easily.

⁸⁰ Supplement 1 also provides more background and documentation.

⁸¹ ‘The young man's letters—his tirade against the meaninglessness of existence in letter number three’ in S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983. p.200.

...And we, we stay spectators; turned towards
all things and still transcending none.
All overwhelms us. We set all in order.
All falls apart. We order it once more
and fall, collapse , disintegrate ourselves.

How were we first persuaded to perform
our every act as though it were our last?

Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter 3: Obedience

The previous chapter put into question the agency of decision; who or what decides? What does legislation, birthright, learning or any externally determined circumstance, bestow on a person and what level of agency do they have, if any, in altering these externally enforced limitations or demands? This chapter looks at the question of Abraham's obedience and examines in what way he might be said to have exercised his own agency in the decision of faith.

According to Kierkegaard (and to Christianity) God must remain hidden. How was it then that Abraham was able to hear God's command? And how could he know that if he heard a voice, that it was God who spoke to him?

A singer does not 'speak' in the normal sense but rather their voice communicates in a different way from their everyday voice. It is tempting to infer that song also comes from a different 'place' than ordinary speech. Perhaps it is possible to think of Abraham 'singing' his response '*Here am I*' to God in accordance with something 'other' than his everyday self. What is at issue here in both God's command and Abraham's response to that call is what is in question in the notion of obedience. Who or what was it that decided to obey: the *not yet* Abraham or the *no longer* Abraham? From what 'place' was that decision made?

subditus

Étienne Balibar's discussion 'Citizen Subject' draws attention to some distinctions which (once again) come from Roman law and which help to think through the question of obedience with regard to Abraham.

In part of his essay, Balibar presents the notion of the subject as *subditus*, meaning one who has entered into a relationship of obedience to the *sublimus*, that is the sovereign prince who has been 'chosen' to command. The *subditi*, the subjects, turn to him to hear the law.

Obedience, says Balibar,

...institutes the command of the higher over lower, but it fundamentally comes from below: as *subditi*, the subjects will their own obedience. And if they will it, it is because it is inscribed in an economy of creation (their creation) and salvation (their salvation, that of each taken individually and of all taken collectively) the loyal subject (*fidèle sujet*), (he who “voluntarily”, “loyally”, that is actively and willingly obeys the law and executes the orders of a legitimate sovereign), is necessarily a faithful subject (*sujet fidèle*). He is a Christian, who knows that all power comes from God. In obeying the law of the prince he obeys God.⁸²

The subject as *servus*, by contrast, is forced to obey, in the relation of slave to master. What the Christian responds to is the sovereign as a divided entity, that is as both human and divine. God speaks through the prince. This, says Balibar, instigates an ‘infinite dialectic’ which both unifies and divides the subject. What he calls ‘obedience’ is the response borne of such a dialectic. The Stoics suggested another level of division within the subject through the paradoxical notion of ‘*free obedience*’, which proposed that if it were possible for the mind to be free even though the body was not, then a slave can also be free. This other level of freedom implies, says Balibar, the notion of ‘the soul’. ‘The mind’ or ‘the soul’ needs to be thought of as something that is on another register of existence to the body, that is not on the natural plane. ‘[The] soul must come to name a supernatural part of the individual that hears the divinity of the order’, says Balibar.⁸³

The idea of *subditus-subjectus*, the one who willingly obeys, has always been separate from the idea of the slave says Balibar, just as with the *sublimus*, the notion of an ‘ordained’ authority is separate from the despot. The life of the Christian, unlike that of the slave, was not treated like a ‘thing’ by the sovereign; both sovereign and Christian entered into an apparently mutual agreement. Obedience to the sovereign brought salvation to the Christian and in return the prince had a responsibility towards him as a kind of ‘guardian’ of his salvation. To say that the Christian obeyed ‘with his soul’ can be interpreted in two ways says Balibar, either as an active and willing participation (‘cooperating’ in ones salvation) or the annihilation of the will.⁸⁴ Whichever one of these was the case, they are both decisions that the Christian must make by themselves. The will is not annihilated without an active relinquishing on the part of the subject. If it were then there would be no spiritual effort or engagement, and no salvation would be ‘earned’.

⁸² E. Balibar ‘Citizen Subject’ in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.41.

⁸³ Ibid p.42.

⁸⁴ Balibar notes that the latter is often seen in writings of Christian mystics. The notion of the annihilation of the will is a feature of many spiritual traditions besides.

This theological model was not the only way of thinking about such a divided subject. In political terms the separation between a subject and a slave was like the distinction of the citizen from the *zōon politikon*, the ‘sociable animal’. Thomas Aquinas for example, according to Balibar, distinguishes between man as *christianitas* (supernatural) and *humanitas* (natural), ‘the believer’ and ‘the citizen.’. The citizen submits to political authority by being submitted as a member of an order or body that is recognized as having certain rights or status (i.e. ‘father’). Here, says Balibar, it becomes more difficult to think of him in terms of *subditus*. His obedience he says becomes ‘menaced’⁸⁵.

In the light of this much condensed version of Balibar’s discussion is it now possible to think of Abraham as both hearing and obeying ‘with his soul’? Balibar, by positing a dialectical model in the case of the *subditus*, suggests a subjectivity which consists of factions with vying interests; political versus spiritual, personal versus legal and so on. The notion of obedience rather than servitude situates the free individual at the centre of those factions, as one who can *decide to submit*, rather than one who is forced to do so, because it safeguards their own (eternal) salvation. Another word for obedience might well be faith, but in Abraham’s case, what was being safeguarded through his trial was not his own eternal salvation, but rather his life, his son’s life and that of all of his descendents, on this earth.

The notion of obedience in Balibar, by introducing the divided and dialectical subject, opens up a space of communication which is not of a material order. The soul, with which the *subditus* hears and obeys, is perhaps what Derrida calls ‘the ineluctable’. Derrida invents a word, *désistance*, which whilst related to the verb *désister*, does not actually exist in French. Although ‘to desist’ in English means ‘to stand down’ or ‘to abstain’, in French *désister* (to desist) is translated more as ‘to withdraw’. *Désistance* is another word for ‘the ineluctable’. The ineluctable is experienced in at least two ways, says Derrida. One is a kind of inevitability or acceptance of events that happen to me. Such events ‘which come upon me or to which I come’ are accidental and do not impinge on my freedom as such. ‘They do not constitute me. I am constituted without it’, says Derrida. A second experience of the ineluctable appears to have ‘already happened’; I arrive on the scene as a latecomer but nonetheless do not remain outsider. Instead, I undergo that which has already begun:

⁸⁵ Balibar in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. pp.42-43.

If I insist upon remaining the subject of this experience, it would have to be as a prescribed, pre-inscribed subject, marked in advance by the imprint of the ineluctable that constitutes this subject without belonging to it, and that this subject cannot appropriate even if the imprint appears to be properly its own.⁸⁶

Here, says Derrida, the outlines of what he calls ‘a certain constitutive *désistance* of the subject’ begins to emerge. This is not, as he says, a ‘destitution’, but rather a ‘(de)constitution’ like a kind of deferral of *being constituted*.⁸⁷ Certainly this is like a kind of resistance of the subject to ‘being marked in advance’, but it is also a kind of living alongside, the ineluctable, as something which can neither be appropriated as its own nor pushed away. This ‘living alongside’ is a withdrawal of sorts and again introduces a schism or separation in the idea of the subject.

Elsewhere Derrida speaks of a ‘dehiscence’ at the heart of subjectivity. Dehiscence describes a movement or action whereby something begins to gape or to peel away from itself. Derrida, also describes dehiscence as an ‘intrinsic dislocation’.⁸⁸ Perhaps *desistance*, that movement which Derrida describes in those two experiences of the ineluctable as something undergone by a subject in a kind of self-willed undoing, or a movement of ‘un-resisting’ or voluntary withdrawal, produces the opening, the *déhiscence* at the centre of the subject? The *subditus*, as the one who puts him or herself (willingly) in a relation of subjection through obedience may also be defined in terms of dis-locatedness. Through dislocation, the empty space or the *ατοπον*, ‘that which has no place’, appears and in which the ineluctable may make its demand heard.

Abraham was called by God to obey his command, but the *decision to obey* was his. Whatever level of submission can be attributed to him, he did deliberately and fully undertake to *submit himself*.

the calling

Kierkegaard seemed to be advocating, through Abraham, something that was for the most exceptional kind of individual. It was not only what Abraham was able to do that made him exceptional but also the fact that he was chosen in the first place. (God summons me, I do

⁸⁶ J. Derrida, ‘Introduction: Desistance’, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*. US: Stanford University Press, 1998. p.2.

⁸⁷ *Ibid* pp.1-2.

⁸⁸ It is an ‘effect’ if you like, of undergoing deconstruction. Derrida in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, p.103.

not summon God.) Obedience then comes from a certain privilege as well as responsibility. To be a chosen one must be the rarest occurrence. Since it is so rare and since I would be so special to be called by God, if I were called would I feel so overwhelmed, so grateful or so surprised at being *chosen* that I would, without hesitation, do his bidding? Yet, asks George Steiner:

How does a human being know that he/she is being summoned by God?
How can human sensibility and intellect differentiate between ecstatic,
deeply felt intimation of divine solicitation, whose actual sources are
those of personal need or emotion, and the authentic word of God?⁸⁹

The origin of the call, says Derrida, is ‘not “human”, no more than it is ‘divine’ but this does not ‘come down to calling it inhuman’. Nevertheless ‘something of the call must remain non-identifiable, non subjectiveable’.⁹⁰ Can this unknown which cannot be assimilated be refused, since it comes upon me before I know it?

This idea of ‘the calling’ was not only theoretical for Kierkegaard but at the heart of an actual event which was to haunt him throughout his life. Adolph Peter Adler was pastor in the Danish island of Bornholm who became a Magister of Theology and, like many at the time, a great follower of Hegel. In 1842, he claimed to have had a revelation from Christ which turned him against Hegel and commanded him to burn all of his previous writings. He was informed that he would be dictated a new work in revelation. In 1843 (the year that *Fear and Trembling* was published) he published four books simultaneously of sacred verses and insights that he claimed were from Jesus. Kierkegaard, who knew Adler, bought the books and subsequently wrote *The Book on Adler*, a scathing critique of Adler. Despite his scepticism, there remained for Kierkegaard the possibility that Adler had in fact received direct communication from Christ. Even if he felt that the manner in which Adler expressed himself was undignified or that he was potentially prone to hallucinations or delusions, his claim was immune to all criticism; it was indefensible, but as Kierkegaard himself admitted, at the same time inviolable. How could he know for sure that Adler was not speaking the truth?

Adler was suspended from his position in 1844 and later admitted that he may have exaggerated his claim when he said that he had had a revelation. He later published other works where he claimed that his former ‘revelatory work’ was instead a work of genius.

⁸⁹ G. Steiner, Introduction in S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*. London: Everyman’s Library, 1994. p.xix.

⁹⁰ Derrida in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L. Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.110.

The situation that Kierkegaard was trying to come to terms with in the writing of *Fear and Trembling* through the figure of Abraham, came to life in the form of Adler. However, Adler became an object of both envy and fear for Kierkegaard; the man was either a madman or an apostle of Christ and nothing in Kierkegaard's powers could discover the truth.

By claiming that he had a revelation from God and that he had been chosen to deliver this revelation to humanity, Adler was announcing that he was an apostle, something that would have seemed outrageous to Kierkegaard. It is easy to imagine his frustration. An apostle (from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning one who is sent, i.e. by God) would never make such a boastful claim. 'Does this election glorify the Apostle?', asks Steiner. 'On the contrary argues Kierkegaard. The authenticating mark of the apostolic is an existential humility of the most radical kind'.⁹¹ However, Adler by speaking out in such a way, could also be the mocked and ridiculed outsider, who is also the true apostle.

The fact that Adler later claimed he was a genius, not an apostle did not resolve the matter. A genius, says Kierkegaard, is born (Genius from the Latin *ingenium*, means inborn talent or ability). The apostle is not born but sent by God on a mission:

A *genius* and an *apostle* are qualitatively distinct, they are categories which belong each of them to their own qualitative spheres: that of *immanence* and that of *transcendence*...The genius is what he is by reason of himself, i. e. by what he is in himself: an apostle is what he is by reason of his divine authority.⁹²

Either claim was problematic for Kierkegaard. If Adler really was the recipient of a revelation then how could he turn round and claim it as his own work of genius? Whatever the truth of the case of Adler what remained for Kierkegaard was the impossibility of ever knowing for sure what took place. At the interior of ourselves, the place at which the unknown summons us is always sealed off, untransmissible, unrepresentable and unjustifiable.

For Steiner, 'The crux of the Adler affair is that of "calling", in the very strongest sense of the term.'⁹³

⁹¹ G. Steiner, Introduction in S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*. London: Everyman's Library, 1994. p.xx.

⁹² Ibid p.201.

⁹³ Ibid. p.xix.

Yet this entity that I have persistently called God, ‘the unknown something’, and that Kierkegaard insists is transcendent, as ‘non’ or ‘super’ human, the *ineluctable*, can also figure, as Derrida suggests, as part of ‘that structure of invisible interiority’ that is called, (in Kierkegaard’s sense), ‘subjectivity’:

We should stop thinking about God as someone over there, transcendent [...] Then we might say; God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. Once such a structure of conscience exists, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is, of producing invisible sense, once I have within me, thanks to the invisible word as such, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself, once I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that) I call myself God – a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from “God calls me”, for it is on that condition that I call myself or that I am called in secret. God is in me, he is the absolute “me” or “self”.⁹⁴

However sympathetic Derrida may be towards Kierkegaard’s writings this view of subjectivity, mystifying as it is, perhaps still presents God as almost thinkable. It offers something for the mind to think about. The difficulty of Kierkegaard’s proposition is that he is not only asking what it is possible to think and where the limits of thinking are, but also what it is possible *to do*. Abraham, despite the anguish and uncertainty of his decision, was able to suspend all of his doubts or suspicions (Was he mad? Was it voice of a demon that called him and not God?) in order to carry to his duty. He was not dragged in abject deference to do something against his will. Instead, despite everything, at the most profound level of himself, he knew exactly what he was doing. That level of commitment to something unknowable is not a matter for thought alone, but, for Kierkegaard, it is a question of ‘becoming subjective’ as the task of existence.

⁹⁴ J.Derrida. *The Gift of Death*. US: University of Chicago Press, 1995. p.109.

Chapter 4: Invisible

Abraham's decision to obey God was carried out in secret. In the last chapter, I said that Abraham, at some level, knew exactly what he was doing. However, for Kierkegaard whatever is truly subjectively appropriated, and Abraham's decision was indeed that, occurs inwardly, in a hidden-ness so profound that even he could not speak of it. How could Abraham know what he was doing if such 'knowledge' did not enter into thought at any level? In this chapter, will look at what Kierkegaard means by 'inwardness' and then through the philosopher Michel Henry, I will explore the notion of *radical subjectivity* as the most fundamental locus of decision, that is decision in the sense that it has been used so far: something which has no quantifiable outcome but which is nonetheless a transformation.

no sign

Abraham performs the leap of faith. In that peculiar movement, he brings together paradoxical and contradictory elements and holds them within him in such a way that is both a turning inwards (in secret) and at the same time an opening up (to the ineluctable God).

In *A Confession*, Leo Tolstoy comes to realise that the people he has seen in the world who are most at ease with their lot in life, who are indeed the happiest of human beings, are those who have faith. Tolstoy does not have faith and can see no way to get it other than by imitating the actions of those who do. In this way, bit by bit, he seems to manage it. The story of Abraham is read out in churches for people to be inspired by. Yet, if we were to look to Kierkegaard's knight of faith, there would be nothing to imitate. This is not about bowing down in church and saying six prayers before bedtime. Abraham's decision to obey Gods command and to do so through faith occurs in that secrecy which Derrida describes so well.

This leap, the movement that is so radically transformative and so profoundly significant, is in fact the most un-dramatic thing from the outside. This vignette from Kierkegaard's diaries may tell us something:

An ambulant musician played the minuet from Don Giovanni on some kind of reed pipe. I couldn't see what it was as he was in the next courtyard - and the druggist was pounding medicine with his pestle, and the maid was scouring in the yard [there is a footnote addition: and the groom curried his horse and beat off the curry-comb against the curb, and from another part of town came the distant cry of a shrimp vender] etc, and they noticed nothing and maybe the piper didn't either, and I felt such well-being.⁹⁵

This everyday scene is described by Kierkegaard as though those people were in a trance, but they are not hypnotised, they are turned inwards, indeed so profoundly inwards that they seem not to be even be conscious of what they are doing themselves. And yet, they are perfectly attuned to their task. Who could be so resolute? Abraham's leap of faith was performed with such inwardness. From the outside it would be impossible to tell that his task was any different to those mundane ones described in the vignette.

Such inwardness is such a profoundly interiority that it seems to move beyond what might be thought of as subjectivity. It is *radical subjectivity*. Inwardness is also hidden-ness, a state which is the opposite in every way from exteriorisation. Not only in the most obvious sense of the *direction* of such a movement, but in the sense that whatever is made visible through exteriority becomes subject to discourse and calculation. Inwardness removes that possibility. In inwardness nothing occurs as such, in any tangible or quantative way. If it can be said that something occurs then whatever that is conceals itself. I previously suggested that Abraham's decision was made at the very point where he did *not yet* know what he was being asked to do, and also, at the point where he *no longer* knew what he was doing. Such inwardness seems to occur at this point where there is an absence of conscious knowledge, thought or any form of manifestation whatsoever. Can decision 'operate', so to speak, at such a level?

What Kierkegaard means by inwardness and hidden-ness is exemplified in an essay from *Works of Love* called 'Mercifulness, A Work of Love Even If It Can Give Nothing and Is Able to Do Nothing'. In this essay, Kierkegaard re-tells, with 'a slight poetic change', the Biblical parable of the poor woman who gives her last penny as alms and a rich man who gives hundreds of pounds. Christ says that the poor woman has given more than the rich man. What if, asks Kierkegaard, the woman had saved up two pennies, which she had wrapped up in a cloth and was going to put in the alms box. She did not realise that a thief had stolen the cloth with the two pennies in it and had replaced it with an empty cloth which

⁹⁵ S. Kierkegaard. *The Diary of Soeren Kierkegaard*. New York: Carole Publishing Group, 1993. [1836 entry] p13.

she then put in the box. Would Christ still say that she gave more than the rich people? Kierkegaard takes this parable to its furthest possible conclusion. There are people in the world, he says, who have no means whatsoever to be merciful; people who Kierkegaard describes as being so devastated by life that their suffering has crushed any capacity to do anything; they are not even able express sympathy in any way whatsoever. Such people, he says, are usually the object of mercifulness but should their misery be added to by denying them the capacity to be merciful? Indeed, the less able you are to give, the more capable you are of mercifulness. Mercifulness may even be at its peak not only when you can do nothing, but when you do not even know that you are being merciful. Temporality sees the outcome says Kierkegaard, it has a ‘bustling conception of the need, and also a sensate conception of the size of the gift and of the ability to do something to remedy the need.’⁹⁶ However, from the point of view of eternity, says Kierkegaard, the most important thing is that mercifulness is practiced, not what the outcome is. Mercifulness is the *how* of giving, not the *what*. He says if you want to see the movement of a stone in water, do you throw it into a waterfall or a quiet pond? The same goes for mercifulness. Wealth and power may effect evident changes in the world for the good of humanity. You could be amazed, says Kierkegaard, but if you are then ‘it is not mercifulness you are seeing’:

[...] mercifulness does not arouse amazement; it stirs you; just because it is inwardness, it makes the deepest inward impression upon you. But when is inwardness more clear than when there is nothing external at all , or when the external by its very lowliness and insignificance is rather like an opposition and from the sensate point of view is actually a hindrance to seeing the inwardness? And when this is the case with regard to mercifulness, we do indeed have the mercifulness that this discourse has been about , the mercifulness that is a work of love even if it has nothing to give and is able to do nothing.⁹⁷

Mercifulness, then, in its purest form is a strangely impotent activity according to the measures of the world. Its value is not as a means to an end, but rather it is valuable in itself, perhaps in the way that an intention towards something can be said to be valuable in its own right.

This example of mercifulness in its total absence of visibility or quantifiable outcome, can tell us something about Abraham’s decision. What was effected in his leap of faith was a transformation which is always hidden from the outside. Abraham’s leap, despite all the apparent drama of it, his anguish and the magnitude of his decision, took place in the most profound hidden-ness. Not only the decision and the leap itself, but also that part of him, as

⁹⁶ S. Kierkegaard. *Works of Love*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995. p.326.

⁹⁷ *Ibid* p.329.

the subjective agency which enacted the decision, was like that ‘secret witnessing’ of Derrida and seemed to be hidden from Abraham himself. This absolute invisibility means that whatever is exteriorised, whatever is *said* about it, can never come close to the thing itself.

of life

It is always the ambivalence of language that it can only approach from afar the thing that it tries to describe. Nowhere is this more true than in the realm of radical subjectivity. Nonetheless, the philosopher Michel Henry writes about radical subjectivity. His writing offers a way to perhaps get closer to describing this ‘entity’ (or movement or state?). Henry (who recently died in 2002), like Kierkegaard, was a Christian philosopher, but came from the much more recent tradition of phenomenology. He writes about the ‘phenomenology of the invisible’. The invisible is whatever takes place in what he calls ‘Life’. The Classical (i.e. Greek) conception of man, he says is that he is more than a living. Man is endowed with *Logos* (reason and language) and ‘Life’ is less than man. The Christian view however is that ‘Life’ is more than man, more than *Logos*. ‘Life’ is more than a living (and God is included in this category of ‘the livings’). Henry also makes the distinction between ‘Life’ and ‘world’: whereas the world is a place where things are shown, ‘Life’ does not appear in the world. The world is the place where things (phenomenon) show themselves as empty but ‘Life’ is where manifestation manifests itself. In *I am the Truth: Towards a philosophy of Christianity*, Henry talks of life, in terms of ipseity, as a ‘... a self-movement that is self-experiencing and never ceases to be self-experiencing in its very movement - in such a way that from this self-experiencing movement nothing is ever detached; nothing slips away from it, away from this self-moving self experience...’. He says that the ‘the essence of Ipseity’ is the identity ‘between experiencing and what is experienced.’⁹⁸

This brief account already introduces quite a few complicated terms. In order to get behind their meaning, I am going to explore them through an earlier work entitled *The Essence of Manifestation* which sets out the grounds for Henry’s thinking and much of his later work.

⁹⁸ M. Henry, *I am the Truth: Towards a philosophy of Christianity*. California: Stanford University Press, 2003. p.57.

Ipeity is far from an evident concept. According to John Taylor it is ‘... not supposed to arise by some subtle process of self-reflection: it is non-relational, and cannot correspond to any introspective process. But then how can it relate in any manner at all to external input? In so doing it would be polluted by content. How can it help create the ‘qualia’ of experience if it itself has no content?This quandary has led to many proposed solutions: do away with ipseity altogether, do away with consciousness as we experience it and make it a ‘centre of narrative gravity’, make ipseity have mysterious powers (non-material, for example), and so on...’ J. Taylor ‘Pure Consciousness in Meditation and the Self’. *Science and Consciousness Review* 2003 (Department of Mathematics, King’s College). Qualia refers to the felt or phenomenal qualities associated with experiences, such as the feeling of pain, seeing of colour etc.

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The discussion on Michel Henry's *Essence of Manifestation* continues in a DVD entitled *Reading Michel Henry*, which you will find in a sleeve attached to the back cover of this text. It is a video diary of my reading of the text which took place in Summer 2005. The running time is approximately 56 minutes. When you have finished watching the DVD, you may like to read reading the Supplement on p.135 which gives some background to the making of this DVD. I have put a coloured dot at the top of this page so that you can find your place in the text again easily.

Conclusion to Part One

The first section of the thesis examines the concept of decision, understood in the uncompromising and transformative sense that Kierkegaard proposes, through the figure of Abraham and his 'leap of faith'. Decision here becomes something that is immensely difficult to define and yet also immensely specific. The first chapter on 'the leap' showed how faith was not only instrumental in Abraham's decision but was also the outcome. When God called Abraham to carry out his command, Abraham's test was to discover whether, on the basis of faith alone, that is on 'the absurd' or unknowable, he was able to decide. He succeeded in renewing his faith as the basis of each decision that he makes before God. He is, therefore, both free and unfree, determined and determining and as such the embodiment of the paradox that Kierkegaard talks of as pertaining to every existing human being.

The chapters on the 'exception' and 'obedience' looked at how Abraham himself constituted (and was constituted by God's command) as the locus of decision. Such a locus was seen as the threshold where external command or law and subjective assent coincide.

The last chapter on the 'invisible' examined the nature of such a locus as profoundly inward, as radical subjectivity. The main part of this examination was conducted through the video diary *Reading Michel Henry*.

This section in general looks at the 'what' of decision, the place or the locus in which decision takes place. Part Two will look at the 'how'. In what way does transformation take place?

PART TWO

H

Then after Eden,
Was there one surprise?
O yes, the awe of Adam
At the first bead of sweat.

Derek Walcott

Preface

After reading *The Essence of Manifestation* by Michel Henry, I felt encouraged to return to Kierkegaard with a renewed dedication. However, when I did, I found that his writing pulled me in all directions once more. Everything I read reminded me of another text and each idea or concept span off into a multitude of associations. My desk was piled high with books and articles: Kierkegaard, Agamben, Derrida and Henry, some half read, most half understood.

I was awash with ideas, forever distracted with new thoughts or discoveries and forgetting what I had already worked on. I had tried to understand Abraham as the ‘locus’ of a most radical decision, one that he made through faith. I had looked at the category of the ‘exception’ in Agamben, ‘obedience’ in Balibar and now had come to Michel Henry’s radical subjectivity. I was still no closer to discovering what it meant to make a decision. Although at the time, I believed I had some clear ‘model’ to work from and from which to continue the research, I had in fact reached a point where it all became totally ungraspable. I wondered if it really was like this and I had foolishly been trying to catch a cloud of bubbles in a lasso.

I found it hard to keep my bearings, feeling much as Kierkegaard described when he became lost on Jutland Heath:

I lost my way; in the distance loomed a dark mass which undulated to and for like a continual unrest. I thought it was the forest. I was quite surprised since I knew there was no forest in the area apart from the one I had just left. Alone on the burning heath, surrounded on all sides by the most consummate uniformity except for the undulating sea straight ahead, I became positively seasick and desperate at being able to come no closer to the woods for all my strenuous walking. I never got there either, for when I came to the main road to Viborg it was still visible, only now with the white road as a starting-point I saw that it was the heathered slopes on the other side of Viborg Lake. Simply because one has such a wide vista out on the beach, one has nothing at all to measure with; one walks and walks, objects do not change, since there actually is no object...¹

¹ S. Kierkegaard. *Papers and Journals : A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996 [July 1940 111 A 68] p.135.

An experience of reading Kierkegaard, as Reidar Thomte comments in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, can be ‘relentless and overwhelming’, but as such is exactly the kind of mood required by Kierkegaard in order that we reach a ‘multidimensional awareness’ of the concepts (philosophical or theological) presented in the writing.² In some senses, I could be reassured then that my reading of Kierkegaard must have had the desired result.

I had believed that the seemingly more systematic approach of Henry would provide some solid ground on which to proceed, but the ‘Kierkegaard effect’ had taken hold of me in ways that I had not foreseen.

I was still fascinated by the uncompromising nature of Kierkegaard’s ideals and even strived to have qualities of courage, individuality and resoluteness myself. I had tried to learn from Abraham, but like most of Kierkegaard’s characters, he proved inscrutable. In any case what would I have in common with any of them, never mind Kierkegaard himself? My subsequent efforts to understand radical subjectivity in philosophical terms, by going on this journey with Henry, did serve to educate me through experience. Trying to understand subjectivity in this way made me realise that no matter how seamless the exterior appears to be, the interior will be in turmoil, most of the time; the mind swinging from one state to another, between various moods, from certainty to uncertainty or from ecstatic confidence to paralysing doubt and everything in between. Perhaps my struggle with Henry’s thought was all in vain. I had been frustrated with the sense that if only I could inhabit his mind (or that of someone like him, of his philosophical calibre so to speak), then I would understand it just like him but perhaps he too had been confused and in turmoil.

I reached a point where I did not know how to go on. I had taken a few wrong turnings, including starting to write a monologue on the death penalty (that should have told me something!) which did not work out. Becoming prey to Kierkegaard’s strategy meant that I had been seduced into following numerous diversions so that I no longer knew what my starting point was.

I did not overtly discuss the extent of my uncertainty with my supervisors, but it must have been evident as one of them asked if I had read *The Crisis and Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, which, as it happened, I had not. He thought that it might be useful. I was so grateful for some precise instruction, for some point of focus that right there and then, before I had even set eyes on the article, I decided that it would be a main reference in my

² S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p.xviii.

project. I was aware at the time that this decision (in ‘faith’ and ‘obedience’) was completely appropriate for my project but I was not aware that I had already been in the process of *deciding*, in the very sense that I had always intended.

What I realise in retrospect is that in fact, I was ‘performing’ the research question itself. Here I was, an individual overwhelmed by the possibilities that presented themselves, unable to decide. In brief, I was in crisis. When the idea of reading this article was suggested to me by someone else (someone of authority!), I could at least make one decision and that was not only to accept the suggestion to read it but to put all my faith in this suggestion without even knowing what it might lead to. I might not be Abraham, but this situation gave me the opportunity of performing a leap of sorts.

In the terms of this task, I turned out that the article had another advantage in that very little is written about it and so I could not rely too much on the scholarship of others to help me.

What follows is an exploration of themes which came to light through the reading of *The Crisis and Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. The first few times that I read it, I felt almost disappointed. To my mind, it lacked the wit or interest of many of Kierkegaard’s other works. It appeared quite ordinary, but at the same time curiously impenetrable. Gradually, I realised that just as the discussion of Abraham had allowed me to focus on the *what*, this article allowed me to concentrate on the *how*.

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In 1847, in the theatre of Copenhagen, Johanne Luise Heiberg, a prominent Danish actress performed the role of Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. This performance is what prompted Kierkegaard to write *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*.³ Like *Fear and Trembling*, the article uses the example of an individual in a particular situation and helps to make clear rather than ‘explain’, the paradox of existence. In this case, the paradox will be looked at not only in terms of *what* it consists of but also in *how* it is lived. Who knows if Abraham really existed but here in this article, the individual is someone whom I can be sure actually lived, a real person, who was not called by God (as far as I know) or asked to anything out of the ordinary. She simply had a job as an actress.

³ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. Frau Heiberg also happened to be married to a prominent figure in literary circles of the day. Kierkegaard was keen on making an impression on her husband J. L. Heiberg, who was a very influential figure in the literary circles of Copenhagen and chiefly responsible for bringing Hegelianism into Denmark. Kierkegaard spend a lot of time and energy trying to get into Heiberg’s circle but eventually gave up when he found his ‘own voice’. For letters addressing Herre Heiberg see S. Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1983.

Frau Heiberg is not directly named as the subject of *Crisis*, and it was not until Kierkegaard wrote to her three years after its publication disclosing that the actress in that article was indeed based on her, that she would know for sure. It is reported that she was delighted and felt that Kierkegaard had understood her predicament precisely. The subject of the article is simply called ‘the actress’, although she is sometimes referred to as the generic ‘Jane Doe’. For my purposes here I will simply call her ‘H’.⁴

Crisis was completed in the summer of 1847 and eventually published in July 1848 in a newspaper called *Fædrelandet* [The Fatherland].

⁴ J.L. Heiberg was also pleased with the article. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. p xvii.

Chapter 5: Passion

Existence...names everything that I must experience (the body, matter, language, others, responsibility, love) ...⁵

Juliet

Imagine, if you will, a woman, aged 30, in the dressing room of a theatre. She is an actress preparing herself to go onstage in Shakespeare's great romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*:

*O for a falconer's voice
To lure this tassel-gentle back again.
Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud,
Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,
And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine
With repetition of my Romeo's name. Romeo!*⁶

It is not the first time that H has rehearsed these words. Some years earlier, as a 16 year old girl, she played the same role in the same theatre. Since then H has become a woman of considerable standing in the community of Copenhagen, a famous and respected artist. In the interim she has played many parts, but has never again played Juliet, until now. The public may have memories of her that one time, as a 16 year old.

In Shakespeare's original play the character of Juliet was written by Shakespeare to represent a 13 year old girl ('not quite 14'). The vocabulary expressed by this child present no less of a conundrum than that a 13 year old should be represented by woman of 30. Indeed to read her lines, it would seem fitting that someone of maturity should play the role. Juliet is a young girl consumed by a powerful sexual desire. She is the seducer, inviting Romeo into her bedroom where, it is implied (but there is little doubt), that the two adolescents sleep together and that it is Juliet who, by morning, is still eager for Romeo to stay, despite the dangers of being caught. Even considering that the transition from childhood to adult may have been more abrupt in Shakespeare's day than the present one, this Juliet was precocious. If such libidinal demands were expressed by a 13 year old girl in a play it would have shocked audiences in Shakespeare's, Kierkegaard's and, perhaps

⁵ Sylviane Agacinski, 'Another Experience of the Question', in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J. L (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991.p.12.

⁶ Act 2 ,Scene 1, *Romeo and Juliet*, Wells, S. and Taylor, G. *The Oxford Shakespeare : The Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2005. p.380.

especially, our own time. In this sense, a woman of maturity is more suited to play Juliet and could do so without comment.⁷

Add to this the fact that in Shakespeare's original company there were no women actors and that boys and young men played female characters, then the role of Juliet could be taken to its most absurd conclusion. Imagine a 30 year-old man in Shakespeare's time playing the part of Juliet, a pre-pubescent girl! The role of Juliet consists then, in both its artistic content and its theatrical history, a web of substitutions, impossibilities and contradictions.

Romeo and Juliet is also a tale of first love, and the impossibility of its fulfilment. The protagonists' families are engaged in an antagonism that is both murderous and intransigent.⁸ Not only do both Shakespeare's protagonists die, but they die because of a tragic misunderstanding.

This much detail on Shakespeare is necessary in order to try to understand, as H would have, exactly what was being asked of her as an actress. Even before looking at the content of the 'little article'⁹, which initially seems like a simple commentary on a theatrical production, a web of elliptical subjects is set up through the character of Juliet and as such is a demanding role for any actress at any time. However, on this occasion, the actress H playing the role of Juliet, provides an occasion for Kierkegaard to examine, once more, how subjective existence effects transformation through decision. In Abraham's case the transformation was a renewal of faith. In the case of H the transformation that she makes is what he will call metamorphosis: 'What is of interest is, with help of the psychological, to be able purely aesthetically to figure out the metamorphosis, or at least to be able to explain when it has occurred.'¹⁰

It was not only that H underwent a metamorphosis, not even that she could do it, but the nature of the transformation and *the way* in which it was performed that is of interest here. Her metamorphosis was, according to Kierkegaard, not only difficult, but also 'beautiful and significant'.¹¹ This unique situation, a famous actress aged 30, returning to the role of

⁷ Even in the play there is some discussion between her mother and the nurse as to when exactly Juliet will be 14, an age to marry. Juliet's mother reminds her that girls younger than she are marrying in Verona, but this is probably not representative at that time.

⁸ The play itself is a reworking of Arthur Brook's poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* 1562. The Capulets and the Montagues are the names of the families.

⁹ Kierkegaard called *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, 'the little article' in his journals.

¹⁰ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. p.306.

¹¹ *Ibid* p.306.

Juliet who she had played only once before at the age of 16, allowed Kierkegaard to examine the course of such a transformation.

Inter et Inter

The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress was written by Kierkegaard under the name of Inter et Inter. At the time, Kierkegaard had already resolved to write solely as a religious author under his own name. The fact that *Crisis* was written under a pseudonym meant that the decision to publish was fraught with indecision.

In his journals, Kierkegaard weighs up the pros and cons. The argument *for* is that it will confound readers who may have believed that he had made the transition from the aesthetic to the religious once and for all.¹² Becoming religious is something, he says, that people like to believe happens later in life, but he insists that he has always been religious from the outset. An argument *against* publishing is that having resolved to write in his own name on the subject of Christianity, publishing a ‘popular’ article about an actress might upset those who may take inspiration from him as a Christian author. He felt that he had a responsibility to those people too.¹³

Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship, his ‘speaking in voices’, is what is often referred to as his dialectic. It is like the setting in motion of a conversation from different or even opposing points of views. Amongst the cast of characters presenting themselves as ‘authors’, it is difficult to discern a unified and consistent point of view. This function of indirect authorship means that I, as reader, cannot rely on the author as authority and must decide for myself about the meaning of the work. Kierkegaard says, ‘as a writer I am a rather odd kind of genius – neither more nor less, with no authority and therefore constantly under instructions to annihilate himself so as not to become an authority for anyone’. This is a rare quality, he says, adding that his thinking is also ‘essentially in the present tense’.¹⁴ Kierkegaard’s polyphonic method projects into the world a series of disparate and elusive characters whose viewpoints could be quite different from those held by Kierkegaard himself (one is never quite sure). Indeed, he often claimed that they were alien to him, as though they really were other people.¹⁵

¹² Kierkegaard divides his writing into into ‘stages’ – the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. However, these are not always consecutive or linear but can occur at the same time.

¹³ S.Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996, [48 I A 175] p.320.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.322. This echoes Kierkegaard’s thoughts throughout the Adler affair [see Chapter 2, this text]

¹⁵ The term pseudonym usually means assuming a name of one who is not known. Just as many writers say that their novels were dictated to them by a voice, or that a character they are writing seemed to have will of their own, so Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms may come about in the same way.

Kierkegaard felt that in his time, the significance and power of the individual was being swallowed up in the crowd, whose communal voice reduced everything in compromise and mediocrity. The cacophony of the group was not a suitable milieu for the development of the individual in any terms but most of all spiritually. The crowd turned itself to external concerns, whereas the individual (before God) sought an inner transformation which had no recognisable value in worldly terms:

Earthly reward, power, honour, etc are not bound up with its proper use, for what are rewarded in the world are of course only changes, or work for change, in externals - inwardness is of no interest to the world, which is indeed externality.¹⁶

Although what Kierkegaard terms inwardness is characterised by silence and unrepresentability, he himself as a philosopher still wanted 'to speak', to philosophize.¹⁷ His authorial strategies allows him to do so from more than one point of view and so introduces a dialectic which not only delivers the responsibility of interpretation over to the reader but also brings the reader into a productive relation with what Kierkegaard called 'the universal': '[...] it is on this that the pseudonyms' computations respecting the universal, the single individual, the special individual, the exception, turn, so as to identify the special individual in his suffering and exceptionality[...]'¹⁸ 'The universal' represents something like the objective view, and as such is a perspective which does not account for the contradictions inherent in individual existence.

The ideological forces that were taking root in Denmark 1848 all advocated collective thinking. Kierkegaard's opposition to these, in addition to his personal situation¹⁹, determined him to pursue the issue of the single individual with more fervour than ever. The notion of 'the single individual' pitted against the collective may be suggestive of narcissism or solipsism, for which Kierkegaard has been sorely criticised to this day (perhaps especially in this day) and for which, undoubtedly, there are some grounds. However, for him, the mentality of the crowd, or any collective kind of thinking encouraged an avoidance of personal responsibility and an insidious kind of self-gratification. Not only

¹⁶ S.Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, London: Penguin Books, 1996, [J&P 48 IX B 63:8] p.351.

¹⁷ For more discussion on this point see P.Ricouer. 'Philosophy after Kierkegaard' in J.Rée and J. Chamberlain (Eds). *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

¹⁸ S.Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996, [49 X1A 130] p.372. Here he also says that *Fear and Trembling*, *Repetition* and *Either/Or* are all commentaries on the category of 'the single individual'.

¹⁹ Both the situation in general in Denmark and Kierkegaard's personal circumstances will be discussed later in more detail.

that but a move towards such thinking was the severest kind of self-deception; it denied the reality, difficulty, contradictions and indeed the full span of experience that is human existence.²⁰ It also quells difference and dissent:

The sparrows rightly peck to death the sparrow which is not like the others, for here the species is higher than the specimens, i.e. sparrows are animals, no more, no less. In respect of what characterizes the human, each is meant on the contrary not to be like the others, to have its peculiarity.

Yet human beings forgive every crime except for that of being what in their view is to be unhuman - namely to be a human being.²¹

The single individual for him is more than an ideal; it is a 'category of awakening when things are complacent and of "conciliation" when things are tottering'.

There was, therefore, for Kierkegaard, a great deal resting on his authorial strategies. Indirect communication which brings me, the reader into relation with the (authority and author-less) content of the works, compelling me to decide for myself as to its meaning and relevance for my life also, according to Kierkegaard, brings '...the category of the individual into play in their relation to the category of the reading public'. This statement is a reminder that the activity of reading as the intellectual consumption of ideas situates each reader in a community of opinion-makers amongst whom I must be able to stand firm, form my own opinions and not simply adopt them from received opinion. The 'reading public', after all, includes those students of scriptures and listeners of gospels at church who consume the edifying story of Abraham.

Given these concerns, it seems entirely appropriate that Kierkegaard decided to publish once more under a pseudonym in the year of 1848. 'Inter et Inter', the name of the author of *Crisis*, is also curiously apt. The term *Inter* is Latin for 'between'. 'Inter et Inter' can therefore be translated as 'between and between'.²² This strange un-name-like name is suggestive of an interval or a waiting room rather than a person. Indeed, it is difficult to

²⁰ A small article in *The Guardian*, 3 Sept 2006, re-affirms the significance of what Kierkegaard is saying, interestingly from a politician not a philosopher. In the article, Tony Benn discusses a painting called the *English People Reading Wycliffe's Bible* (1927) by George Clausen. He explains the history of the painting as follows: in 1401, a Heresy Act was passed in England which made it illegal for any person except a priest to read the Bible, in case ordinary people reached their own conclusions about what the Bible meant. Some people defied the law and read the Bible out in their fields. The painting is an image of group of people doing just this. John Wycliffe was a translator of the Bible into English who was burnt at the stake in 1384.

²¹ S.Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996, [48 IX A 80] p.311.

²² Inter et Inter is also reminiscent of *aut/aut*, the Latin translation of either/or, as Howard and Edna Hong point out in their Historical Introduction, S. Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, p.xvi.

designate, even in imagination, the name 'Inter et Inter' with an identity as 'he' or 'she' or any kind of person whatsoever. The 'little article' *Crisis*, then, both as an anomaly in a sequence of religious works and authored by this incognito, signals a work of ambivalent status in the body of Kierkegaard's writing. Such ambivalence only serves to intensify the dialectic set up by the use of any pseudonym. It provides an opening whereby I, as reader, become the point at which disparate (in this case unidentifiable, perhaps not even human) voices coincide.

two places at once

The story of the actress H, via the role of Juliet, written by this strange and amorphous Inter et Inter, means that the subject of *Crisis* elides, not seeming to exist in any single source. How then to discuss the metamorphosis of the actress which is, after all, the central concern of this article?

For Kierkegaard, the single individual is of more significance than the universal. The universal which reduces existence, does not allow subjectivity to be lived in its full potential, that is as paradox. The comparison between 'universal' and 'singular' existence is exemplified by Kierkegaard in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in a discussion about whether there is any possible knowledge of God. He says that, objectively, it is possible to conclude that any 'knowledge' of God has been attained through reflection or deduction. Subjectively too, an individual can believe that they really are in relation with God (remember Adler). On which side is truth, he asks? Hegel, 'the professor', he says, would claim that it is on neither side, but rather in the 'mediation'. Mediation is a term from Hegel, which can be used to suggest a connecting link or a relationship between two things. The thing that something is linked to may also be called a mediation. That is, if A is related to B and B to C, then B is a mediation between A and C. Something is constituted (partly or fully) by the totality of its mediations.²³ However, says Kierkegaard:

...if only someone could say how an existing person goes about being in mediation, because to be in mediation is to be finished; to exist is to become. An existing person cannot be in two places at the same time, cannot be subject-object. When he is closest to being in two places at the

²³ On the 'universal' see S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985, p99 and elsewhere: 'Professor' is how Kierkegaard, under the name of Johannes Climacus, refers to Hegel and his followers: 'When Christianity entered the world there were no professors or assistant professors whatever – then it was a paradox for all...' in S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1974. p.220.

same time, he is in passion; but passion is only momentary, and passion is the highest pitch of subjectivity.²⁴

Existence, as becoming, seems to oscillate between subject and object, as neither one nor the other but in a continual movement between the two. However, in this statement from *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, Kierkegaard suggests that at some point it may be possible to break out of this flux, in *a moment of passion*. Once more the moment arises, in this case, not only as a transitional point but, in passion, as something more; a transcending of existence. It is possible only *momentarily* for an individual to inhabit this impossible ground through passion: ‘for the existing person, passion is existence at its very highest – and we are, after all, existing persons...in passion, the existing subject is infinitized in the eternity of imagination and yet is also most definitely himself.’²⁵

In the light of the discussion on Abraham, it no longer seems strange to say that a person can be close to ‘being in two places at the same time.’ The moment or the instant of decision indicates through an a-temporal temporality, the *what* of such an existence. Perhaps ‘passion’ introduces the *how*.

The word ‘passion’ comes from *passio* (the late Latin) meaning ‘suffering’ or ‘being acted upon (from the Latin verb *pati*, to suffer). The sufferings of Christ are also called the ‘Passion’. *Passio* also means ‘devotion’ or ‘enthusiasm’. The Latin root of ‘to suffer’ is *sufferre*, from *sub* (up) + *ferre* (to bear) meaning to submit, to endure, to feel or to undergo. Passion then, linked to the idea of suffering, is not (or not only) a helpless or pitiful state but something bestowed upon me and voluntarily borne and lived by me. It is a taking on of responsibility, freely and in freedom. It is perhaps also a form of obedience, in the sense described by Balibar in Part One of this text. Passion or suffering (the two now become inseparable), like obedience, is not a simple form of subservience. As Kierkegaard points out the word ‘passive’ in Danish is *affected*. It also means an uncontrolled emotional state or ‘a suffering of the mind’. The word ‘affect’ he says is more likely to evoke ‘the convulsive boldness which astounds us, and because of that we forget that it suffering’²⁶. Passion, then, is also to suffer, to be affected or changed by something. It is also an enthusiasm on the part of the individual so willing that, without being able to say how or why, it seems that they *have taken it upon themselves* to suffer.

²⁴ S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1974. p.19.

²⁵ Ibid. pp.196 -197.

²⁶ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.49.

Perhaps it is true that Kierkegaard's individual, their inwardness, hidden-ness and multi-faceted character, corresponds to a psychoanalytical model that is familiar today. The notions of ego, subconscious and unconscious could provide models to work with when analysing his version of subjectivity. If there is such a comparison to be made, I am sure it will have been done. Such analysis might only serve to 'explain' Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard used the term 'psychological' in subtitles, for example in 'A Venture in Experimenting Psychology' (*Repetition*) or 'A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin' (*Concept of Anxiety*). However, the term 'psychological', as the editors Howard and Edna Hong say, would have meant something quite different in Kierkegaard's time. In the 19th Century, psychology was part of philosophy and although Kierkegaard would have been aware of disciplinary developments in the area of psychology ²⁷, in using the term 'psychological' he would have had in mind something quite different than just a scholarly idea:

"Psychology" and "psychological" qualify the imaginative constructing by adding an emphasis on the embodiment of a view or views of man in characters, events, relations, just as the poet makes the imaginative construction in palpable form, the idea made visible, a philosophy of man *in concreto*. ²⁸

Equally, philosophical ideas of 'the subject' in terms of essence, substance, presence or absence, indeed any metaphysical or ontological concern, tell us little about existence as 'becoming'. The 'becoming subject' suggests something that changes and as such must *something* not endure in that change? Aristotle, for example, thought of 'subject' as 'first substance', *hypokeimenon*, an 'underlying thing' which persists when other aspects change. This notion of 'first substance' assumes a kind of unchanging essence. In the case of Kierkegaard it seems less and less likely that such a thing can be spoken of, at least as a unified entity. However, it is evident that the actress H in *Crisis* is one and the same person at 16 as she is at 30. What is it then that undergoes metamorphosis?

²⁷ For example, as Howard and Edna Hong point out, Kierkegaard had read Johann E. Erdmann's text *Grundriss der Psychologie*, which described the first three parts of psychology as philosophical anthropology. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983, p.xxii.

²⁸ Howard and Edna Hong point out in a footnote to their Historical Introduction of *Repetition* that this can be found in *Philosophical Fragments*. I could not find it there but did find it elsewhere in S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 1974, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.190. Here Kierkegaard says that 'being is the abstract prototype' of what is *in concreto*. Hong reference can be found in S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983, p.xxix.

What Kierkegaard calls the psychological, or ‘the imaginative constructing’ that comes about in ‘man *in concreto*’, as subjectivity, is the embodiment of the paradox. The paradox which is also the truth and (I repeat) which emerges from ‘the placing together of the eternal and existing human being’, could not be embodied and lived in its full paradoxical complexity, without subjectivity. Without the existing human being, such truth would remain forever outside, like a phantom, unable to take form.

The existing individual (again I repeat) is also the ‘learner’; the one who is oblivious to the truth and therefore in ‘un-truth’ or sin. A ‘learner’ is capable of *passion*, that is, suffering, ‘being acted upon’ in such a way that they are willing to be changed. Passion, the *closest to being in two places at the same time*, is the *highest pitch of subjectivity*. One who is in a state passion exists at the threshold of categories to which it both belongs and is excluded.²⁹ Passion is subjectivity at its most profound. Jean Wahl puts it like this:

La passion s’allume aux contradictions du paradoxe, et, d’autre part, c’est elle qui fait la tension du paradoxe. Elle est cause et effet du paradoxe. Elle est le paradoxe même.

Passion is ignited through the contradictions of the paradox [which also] create the tension of the paradox. It is the cause and effect of the paradox. It is itself the paradox.³⁰

To come into existence as *existant*, as the single individual, is to suffer existence in all its paradoxical glory. Looked at it from this point of view, passion as suffering is very far from being a state of subjection in an impotent sense, but is rather a state in which I deliver myself wholeheartedly to the paradox of life. Whatever subjectivity may be, and with every attempt at description it lends itself less and less to description, and whatever part it may play in such a movement, it seems less appropriate than ever to think of it as an essence or substance. Any sense of what this impassioned subjectivity could be, what it could feel like or where it can be found, seems just as enigmatic as the mysterious and somewhat intransigent kind of radical subjectivity posited by Michel Henry. It begins to seem more like an energy or force than any ‘thing’ or person, permeable, mutable and yet profoundly instrumental.

²⁹ It is perhaps like occupying that exceptional state that Agamben describes. See p26 of this thesis

³⁰ J. Wahl. *Etudes Kierkegardiennes*. Paris: library philosophique J. Vrin, Paris. 1949. p.359. All translations of Wahl are my own as there is no available English translation of it, to my knowledge.

the actor

As the discussion progresses, the notion of subjectivity becomes less distinguishable from those other subjects of discussion: passion, the moment, the paradox, the exception and so on. In order to move away from this potential conceptual quagmire it might be useful to, once again, call upon Étienne Balibar, whose explication of subjectivity in the example of Abraham was so helpful. Balibar helps to provide a structure through which to think this paradoxical subject, one which is not only conceptual but also social and political; in brief something which is, whilst just as complex, perhaps easier to relate to as ‘man *in concreto*’ as one embodied, or embedded in the world and not only as an abstract object of reflection.

For Balibar the French Revolution, a turning point in the history of Western Democracy with which the age of ‘the citizen’ began, signals a rupture in the idea of ‘subject’. The origin of the subject is not the beginning, he says; the subject comes after man. The citizen is neither ‘individual or collective, neither public nor private being’, but these concepts are, says Balibar, present in the concept of citizen as ‘suspended’, that is not firmly aligning themselves to either ‘citizen’ or ‘non-citizen’.³¹

The citizen cannot be thought of as an isolated individual, says Balibar, but neither is he (and once more the citizen must be referred to as ‘he’) completely absorbed into the collective.³² The citizen, as concept and as individual, can only exist if there is a separation between public and private realms, both of which he occupies. ‘He is defined as a public actor’, says Balibar, but his ‘private’ existence is not held ‘in reserve’. The place where he is at home, that is no longer in the public role is *oikos*, or dwelling, a realm which is both private and transparent.³³ His non-political relations or roles involve interaction with ‘non-citizens’: women, children, servants, employees and so on. Stepping from his role as citizen in the public domain as an active participant and servant of the *polis*, he comes home

³¹ In 1789, the *Declaration of Human Rights of Man and the Citizen* became law in France. See Balibar in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J.L. (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. pp.35 -36

³² Derrida In ‘Eating Well’ says that the ‘feminine condition’ reached its worse moment in the Declaration of rights. See Derrida in Cadava, Eduardo, Connor, Peter and Nancy, Jean-Luc (Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?* London: Routledge, 1991. p.114

According to Balibar, the notion of the citizen is the antithesis to the organicist idea of *corpus mysticum*. Saint Pauls’ first epistle to the Corinthians suggests such a ‘body’: ‘For as the body is one, and hath many members... so also is Christ... And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you... Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular...’ (I Corinthians 12:12-27). Love (*agap*) between the members unifies the body (I Corinthians 6:15-16).

³³ οἶκος, oikos, meaning of uncertain affinity; a dwelling (more or less extensive, literal or figurative); by implication, a family (more or less related, literally or figuratively); home, house(-hold). See Strong’s Greek dictionary at

<http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/FRMSTRGRK36.htm#S3624>

to take on his decidedly more intimate role as father, patron, householder and husband. At home, however, he is ‘master’, an ‘other’ to himself as citizen and other to those ‘non-citizens’ amongst whom he abides. One can see why, in more than one sense, this is what Balibar calls the citizen’s ‘madness’.³⁴

The idea of ‘role’ is bound up with the history of ‘persona’, says Balibar elsewhere. Referring (once again) to 4th Century BC Roman law, he makes the link between ‘person’ as both ‘persona’ and ‘subject’. In Roman times, the term ‘person’, from the Latin *persona*, would have meant several things. It could mean an actor’s mask used to identify the various characters (in Greek and Roman times the same actor often played several roles). The actor would project his voice (again it would have been ‘he’) by means of a megaphone-shaped mouth thus giving the meaning *per...sona*, by sound. The term ‘person’ was also used as a legal term. In ancient (and modern) Roman law *jus personarum* would not mean a law or rights of persons but of status. (the example of *homo sacer* showed how someone could be a man but not a person). Status was something that could be granted through natural occurrences such as whether one was male, female, child, sane, insane and so on as well as civil status. A ‘person’ in judicial terms then had no real identity as an individual human but rather as the representative of a particular status.³⁵

It may be spurious to place together observations from Balibar that do not ‘belong’ to the same argument, so to speak. Nonetheless, they do address the same question; how to think of ‘the subject’ (and indeed in Balibar’s case, *when* to think of the subject, as something which precedes or follows another socio-political category of individual). Bringing these insights, however briefly, to bear on Kierkegaard indicates just how complicated is the system into which an individual enters at birth. The ancient idea of *persona* to the more recent idea of the citizen gives form to the externals which coincide in individual existence: relations of power, juridical obligations and requisite roles. Kierkegaard’s singular individual is equally involved in such relations. The characters that appear in Kierkegaard’s work are admittedly theatrical. He makes room for all kinds, from buffoons to heroines, but even if they do not resemble creatures of this world they nonetheless appear in the ‘public’ domain: Abraham through the history of the church, the

³⁴ Balibar in Cadava, E., Connor, P. and Nancy, J.-L.(Eds). *Who Comes After the Subject?*. London: Routledge, 1991. p.52 Balibar. Once again I must say ‘he’ as a woman cannot be defined as citizen in this context, neither can she be fully embraced in the term ‘human’. She, with others remains outside of the protection granted to the human, citizen and man.

³⁵ E. Balibar, Cassin, B. and de Libera, A. *Vocabularies of European Philosophies, Part 1: ‘Subject’ in Radical Philosophy*, Vol 138, 2006, p.35. Some of this detail on Roman law came from a website: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09079a.htm>

contemporary Christian in Christendom and the actress H in 19th Century Denmark in the world of popular entertainment.³⁶

the role

In reading the notion of subjectivity in Kierkegaard through Balibar's *persona*, I do not mean to suggest that it is like a series of costumes worn for a time and then discarded. As Balibar shows through the category of the citizen, the idea of taking on roles introduces divisions in the subject. The individual playing out these roles straddles the domain of public and private, unable to settle once and for all in either, but nonetheless existing, somehow, between the two. Such existing may be like that 'madness' of the citizen whom Balibar talks of, but in Kierkegaard this is exactly how it is for every *existant*. The singular individual is produced at the dislocation of those innumerable roles.

It seems appropriate then, not to think of subjectivity as a specific entity, located at any point in time or space but rather as a kind of vehicle or catalyst, albeit one whose external form mutates throughout Kierkegaard's texts: Abraham the monolithic, impenetrable father of faith; H, in the role of Juliet, effervescent, ardent and elliptical; the stoic figure of Christ, bloody and sorrowful on the cross. All of these are like motifs of subjectivity. In the same way that forks of lightning directs an electric current to a particular destination and clouds of all shapes transport water to distant lands, so these forms seem to be a conduit for a transforming energy or passion. Precisely what occurs behind those screens, and precisely how it happens, remains concealed but that is not to say that nothing can be detected. I can watch the dancer in admiration and wonder how she performs her movements with grace and apparent ease. Or, I can try to dance myself: 'The mass of humans live disheartened lives of earthly sorrow and joy, these are the sitters-out who will not join in the dance.'³⁷

³⁶ Christendom is Kierkegaard's name for the way in which the church has developed institutionally, that is away from its truly spiritual function.

³⁷ 'It is said that the dancer's hardest task is to leap straight into a definite position, so that not for one second does he have to catch at the position but stands there in it in the leap itself. Perhaps no dancer can do it - but that knight does it. The mass of humans live disheartened lives of earthly sorrow and joy, these are the sitters-out who will not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers too and they have elevation. They make the upward movement and fall down again, and this too is no unhappy pastime, nor ungracious to behold. But when they come down they cannot assume the position straightaway, they waver an instant and the wavering shows they are nevertheless strangers in the world. This may be more or less evident, depending on their skill, but even the most skilled of these knights cannot hide the vacillation. One doesn't need to see them in the air, one only has to see them the moment they come and have come to earth to recognise them. But to be able to land in just that way, and the same second to look as though one was up and walking, to transform the leap in life to a gait, to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely - that is something only the knight of faith can do - and it is the one and only marvel'. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985. p.70.

It cannot be forgotten that no matter how theatrical Kierkegaard's style may be and no matter how many guises his characters or authors adopt, everything leads back to the question of subjective decision made on the basis of an external unknown authority, God. What is really at stake in the notion of the single individual, for Kierkegaard, is how to decide to be a Christian. That is, how to follow the example of Christ. An 'imitation of Christ' is however, like the imitation of Abraham. Christ was an example in the supreme sense but also an exception in every way imaginable. In Christian terms (and for Kierkegaard there are essentially no other) Jesus of Nazareth himself was also playing a role, the 'ultimate role'; that of a human being. God sent his son (who was also God himself!) to earth to live as a man born of lowly origins and destined to be ostracised and ridicule. This man was to be the saviour of human kind, offering them a way out of their suffering and a means to eternal life. He knew that he would die on the cross for trying to carry out his work on earth, but he also knew that he would be resurrected. However, he had to live as a human being would, with a human body, mind and heart. Even though he was also God, his life did not give him God's privilege. His faith was tried, his heart ached, his body was in pain. He accepted existence in its entirety. When, after abject humiliation and torture, he hung on the cross, his outcast friends around him and two thieves on either side, he cried out those well-known words: 'Oh God why have you forsaken me'. Although, he had known that he would be resurrected, at that moment he knew nothing; everything became possible, even that he was not the son of God. He may only have been an ordinary human being who had heard voices, he may have been a madman.

Jesus of Nazareth knew the script of his life from a young age, and yet it did not protect him from suffering. He did all of it willingly. Through his subjection, according to Christianity, he also brought the divine onto earth and the possibility of human relation with the divine.

In that astonishing logic of the incarnation, Christ relinquished his divine privilege in order to inhabit his earthly existence whilst never ceasing to be divine. He sacrificed himself and at the same time became the sacrificial object, which his father offered to the world. What does it mean to sacrifice oneself? In Part One, I suggested that decision is also a sacrifice. Abraham, in his decision to obey God's command, took on the role of 'father of faith', without knowing in advance what such a role would entail. His decision was also a sacrifice of himself, in the sense that he willingly gave up all certain ground for his own subjective decision or agency, indeed for his existence as a whole. In assuming the responsibility of that role he started to exist in two places at once. Can it be said that the actress H, in playing the role of Juliet also sacrificed herself, albeit in a seemingly less remarkable story, for the sake of a 'beautiful and significant' metamorphosis? She played the role of Juliet, a

subject so unlikely and idealised that she would never truly know her. H herself is not 'abolished' in the process but remains as herself while this other exists simultaneously in her. Here, that other is not only the one fictitious Juliet, but her past 16 year old self *as* Juliet. These *personae*: the 16 year old and the 30 year old H along with Juliet in all her guises, are like reflections in a hall of mirrors but they are not a simple re-doubling.³⁸ They are more like different aspects which co-exist in one body, while the 'real' H hovers between them, just like Balibar's citizen returning home.

³⁸ For example, in Dostoevsky's unfortunate character Golyadkin where he discovers that a complete replica of himself has come into existence, taken his job and so on. F. Dostoyevsky, 'The Double' in *Notes from the Underground and The Double*. London: Penguin, 1972.

Chapter 6: Metamorphosis

Kierkegaard says that what is of interest to him in *Crisis* is the metamorphosis of the actress. However, it is by now clear that whatever undergoes metamorphosis is not a definable entity existing as or within the actress H, as self or subject. What then is the metamorphosis of the actress and in what does the metamorphosis in question consist?

When a chrysalis changes into a butterfly, it actually changes species; a butterfly is in no way essentially the same as a chrysalis. The metamorphosis of Kafka's hero Gregor Samsa, is like this. His external appearance changes suddenly from human to insect and then, as he starts to behave like an insect too, his internal metamorphosis takes place. Metamorphosis is a total transformation of either appearance or character, perhaps both. It suggests that something comes into existence that was not there before. In that coming into existence, the first thing is overtaken by the second. Although metamorphosis is a transformation in stages, this kind of change is one which involves substitution rather than evolution. The actress in *Crisis* undergoes a metamorphosis, says Kierkegaard. The question is whether the meaning of metamorphosis that has just been outlined is what Kierkegaard means by the term.

The metamorphosis of the actress is possible because H, at the age of 30, takes on the role of Juliet, having once before played the same part when she was 16. Evidently, these two occasions may indicate stages of metamorphosis: the first 'youth' and the second 'maturity'. Does the metamorphosis then consist in a change from youth to maturity over a period of time? Perhaps, but the 'youth' and 'maturity' in question are characteristics of the same individual which suggest evolution rather than transformation.

• • •

Juliet, says Kierkegaard, is the most significant assignment for any actress. Whoever undertakes to play the role needs to be able to carry the 'weight of Juliet's intense complexity'. In order to represent Juliet 'an actress must have distance of age' Kierkegaard says, 'no 16 year old could play her'. Yet the actress H did play Juliet when she was aged

16. What she did at 16 was not only to relate herself to the author's words as any actress could do, but relates 'herself to herself in the something more that very properly may be called resonance in relation to the lines and consonance in relation to the whole character.'³⁹

At 16, says Kierkegaard, the actress could play Juliet because there was already in her an 'essential genius' which related itself to what he calls 'the idea' of 'feminine youthfulness'. The 'idea' of youthfulness is quite different from the 'externality' says Kierkegaard. 'Youthfulness' here does not seem to be something that everyone would have had even originally. 'Feminine youthfulness', in the straightforward sense of being a young girl of 16, is a 'simple youthfulness' which time will destroy. If, however, there exists an ability to relate to *the idea* of 'feminine youthfulness' then this is something that time cannot destroy. In this case, the passing of time which destroys 'simple youthfulness' introduces the possibility of a dialectical relation to *the idea* of youthfulness. 'Simple youthfulness' is *only one life* and as such is inherently undialectical. It is the *additional life* provided by the relation to the idea which introduces the dialectic. What time makes manifest is 'the dialectical in her in the metamorphosis'.⁴⁰ The dialectic in turn will 'make the genius more and more manifest'.⁴¹ The notion of 'genius' emerges once more and this time an interpretation from *The Concept of Anxiety* seems closer to the mark. Here, Kierkegaard relates the notion of 'genius' to that of subjectivity in the same sense that Hegel does, as the 'particular nature of a man who decides his actions and destiny'.⁴² If 'genius' is tied to subjectivity then it cannot exist or become manifest without it. Through the actress, genius becomes manifest and the subjectivity through which it does so is not that of H alone but H *via* the role of Juliet.

Kierkegaard had a long-standing interest in theatre and would be aware of the difficulties in casting Juliet. It would have been no surprise to him that an older actress would do it. For Kierkegaard to make something of the fact that H, when she played the part of Juliet for the second time was aged 30, is not simply a play with numbers or amazement at an age-defying feat. It is not that the actress really believes she is Juliet, even temporarily or to prove that an older woman understands the intricacies of youth more than any girl. No, the challenge for H is to play Juliet, *as though for the first time*, at 30 years of age. It is as though that previous self becomes contemporaneous with her 30 year-old self:

³⁹ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. p 321.

⁴⁰ Ibid p.311-312. Italics on Kierkegaard's terms 'only one life' and 'additional life' are my own.

⁴¹ Ibid p.319.

⁴² S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p.98 fn.

She will not long for the blazing of what has vanished... pure, calmed and rejuvenating recollecting, like an idealized light will trans-illuminate the whole performance, which in this illumination will be completely transparent.⁴³

This lack of nostalgia, the regard which is not backward looking but which brings something forward from the past, is a peculiar kind of movement. What Kierkegaard calls this ‘rejuvenating recollecting’, does not advocate some kind of time travel or a literal turning back of the years. It is not simply a return, but a renewal and an intensification of the initial state, without moving backwards or forwards in any quantitative alteration: ‘She will not be young again in superficial sense but in relation to ideality she will be younger and younger’⁴⁴

The metamorphosis of the actress, then, seems to consist in revealing something that existed from the beginning. How can this be metamorphosis? Whatever constitutes metamorphosis ‘must be present from the beginning’ says Kierkegaard, but it is ‘not decisively used and does not decisively make its appearance before some time has passed – precisely this is the metamorphosis’.⁴⁵

‘At 30 the metamorphosis is successful’, says Kierkegaard.⁴⁶ By then H is an actress who can give a ‘performance in the eminent sense’. An actress as she gets older can perfect her craft and take on roles in accordance with her age. This, says Kierkegaard, is ‘perfectability’ and there is nothing wrong with that. However, what is of concern in *Crisis* is not ‘perfectability’, but ‘potentiation’. ‘Potentiation’ is precisely the ‘more intensive return to the beginning’. At 30, when H is giving the eminent performance the 16 year old H asserts herself *via* the role of Juliet, not intruding upon, eclipsing nor overtaking the older and all. The older allows the younger to exist within and through her without loss or gain.

The notion of potentiality, from Aristotle, means that beings can potentially act or be acted upon. Such potentiality is either inborn or learned. The eyes for example, have the innate potential for sight and whatever is seen is something which ‘acts upon’ sight. Therefore the potentiality of sight is to ‘be acted upon’. Being able to draw is something that can be learned through practice and so the ability to draw is the potentiality to act. Actuality is the aim (*telos*), the end of potentiality. As such actuality itself is the ultimate fulfilment of the

⁴³ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. p323.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.319.

⁴⁵ Ibid p.319.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p306.

potential of any act (or acting upon). For Aristotle, if potentiality had the ability not to pass over into the actual, then it also had to be *im-potentiality*. Strangely, it could be said that *im-potentiality*, that which belongs to potential itself, far from being *im-potence* or powerlessness is in fact a kind of power: the power of a being not to actualise itself or to be able to withhold from actualisation. The reasoning becomes extremely complicated and perhaps distracting to go into in great detail here, but in relation to Kierkegaard it makes sense of what he refers to as ‘the metamorphosis of potentiation’ as ‘a more and more intensive return to the beginning’. This kind of potentiation is perhaps closer to *im-potentiality* as it somehow retains a potentiality of its own and involves a decisive movement which does not end in its own abolition.⁴⁷ The metamorphosis of the actress then, in part, seems to consist in that return to the beginning; a beginning which becomes re-charged with an ever more concentrated potential. The potential for transformation and perhaps even in what this potential consists will already be present at the beginning.

the first

I began by trying to define the progression of the metamorphosis. Now I find that what I perceived to be two discrete stages, actually collapse into each other as though they are either one and the same or are concurrent. However, Kierkegaard does try to define the qualities of the actress from the outset and if there is a first stage at all, even if it also reappears in the second, it may be found in his description.

Whatever the actress H is able to do aged 30, she was already able to do in her debut. She had what Kierkegaard calls an ‘indefinable possession’; a quality of extreme rarity which H already had at 16. At 30 she still had it. Did anything change in that time? In an effort to

⁴⁷ For Aristotle: “What is potential can both be and not be. For the same is potential as much with respect to being as to not being.” What is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be. ‘To set im-potentiality aside is to fulfil it - to give potentiality back to itself’. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben outlines an interesting reading of Aristotle’s notion of potentiality through Antonio Negri. Negri proposes that constituting power is not reducible to sovereignty (*Il potere costituente*. 1992), but instead (as far as I understand it) might be thought of as some kind of ‘free praxis’. I’m certain that I have not fully understood this yet as I have not read Negri’s work. For the moment though this proposal offers some interesting thoughts on potentiality as the power ‘not to be’ which Agamben takes up. The problem of ‘constituting power’ becomes, says Agamben, the problem of ‘the constitution of potentiality’ and ‘the problem of the unresolved dialectic between constituting and constituted power’ which requires a re-thinking and re-articulation of the relationship between potentiality and actuality. He says: ‘Potentiality that exists is precisely the potentiality that cannot pass over into actuality... This potentiality maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of suspension; it is capable of the act in not realizing it, it is sovereignly capable of its own im-potentiality cited from G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. pp.43 - 45.

discuss this elusive aspect of H's character, Kierkegaard does not absurdly try to define 'the indefinable', but nonetheless presents some pointers by degrees of proximation.

Firstly, he says, that the quality that H had from the beginning is something 'which asserts itself and is unconditionally obeyed' but which at the same time is 'at her beck and call'. It is her 'good fortune' which, he goes on to say, is her 'youthfulness', but not in a 'statistical' sense. It is also the 'restlessness of infinity'; an 'invigorating, healing, joyous, indefatigable' energy, the 'first fieriness of essential genius'. This great liveliness and energy, however, has the effect of calming rather than stimulating the spectator who becomes lulled into surrender to the spectacle. This energy seems to have contradictory qualities such as 'trustworthiness' and 'roguishness' which vie with each other in an inner activity (and in joyous exuberance) not visible to the audience. On the face of it, everything appears calm.⁴⁸

Kierkegaard then says that this 'indefinable something' is the 'expressiveness of soul', an 'unreflective inwardness ...essentially in harmony with ideality'. Finally, and it would seem that this is the closest that he can get to describing it, he says the actress is '*in proper rapport with the onstage tension*'. Onstage tension here is the 'weight of all those eyes', the public who are waiting expectantly and who sit in judgement.⁴⁹

The qualities that the actress had from the beginning remain mysterious. However, in the way that Kierkegaard describes them, something like a transforming activity seems to take place within or through the actress. It is as though there is an internal compounding of disparate elements into a seamless appearance. Energy and exuberance are transformed into an external calm which draws the audience into the performance.

⁴⁸ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. pp 308 – 309.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.312. Trying to define the indefinable calls to mind 'the unutterable' which Kierkegaard talks of elsewhere. 'Suppose that the unutterable joy is based upon the contradiction that an existing human being is composed of the infinite and the finite, is situated in time, so that the joy of the eternal in him becomes unutterable because he is existing; it becomes a supreme drawing of breath that cannot take shape, because the existing person is existing. In that case, the explanation would be that it is unutterable; it cannot be anything else – no nonsense. If, however, a profound person first condemns someone or other who denies that there is an unutterable joy and then says: No I assume that there is an unutterable joy, but I go further and utter it, then he is only making a fool of himself, and the only difference between him and the other whom he condemns is that the other is more honest and direct and says what the profound person is also saying, since they both are saying essentially the same thing'. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. p.221.

The young actress is 'in her element in the tension of the stage; precisely there she is light as a bird'.⁵⁰ The transformation or compounding of all of that internal activity into a seamless and tranquil exterior occurs only when there is this tension onstage. According to Kierkegaard, what is made manifest is not this tension but lightness. The movement of pressing down, he says, pushes something else upwards. One becomes light by means of weight.⁵¹ It is often said that it is the casting off of burdens that make us light says Kierkegaard, but in 'higher' sense, the opposite is true:

The celestial bodies, for example, hover in space by means of a great weight; the bird flies by means of a great weight; the light hovering of faith is precisely by means of an enormous weight; the highest soaring of flight of hope is precisely by means of hardship and the pressure of adversity. But the onstage illusion and the weight of all those eyes are an enormous weight that is laid upon a person. Therefore, where this fortunate rapport is lacking, not even proficiency to an ever so high degree can entirely conceal the weight of the burden, but where this fortunate rapport is present, the weight of the burden continually transforms itself into lightness.⁵²

The 'first time' the actress could fly like a bird, relying on the gravity of the world to support her and to lift her up into flight. The second time 'the weight of all those eyes' was not on her. Her performance became more difficult, not because the audience had high expectations, but precisely the opposite. Over the years, the actress had gained acclaim and recognition for both her art and her social standing. In that time, says Kierkegaard, it has become a 'national duty' to admire her.⁵³ The crowd's admiration cannot be sustained through years of familiarity; habit means getting used to even the most extraordinary things and consequently always wanting something new. Kierkegaard talks about people in the public eye making rare appearances, or taking a long time to write novels in order to give an illusion of rarity and worth. This actress, however, appeared often to the crowds in Copenhagen and her constant availability was in danger of undermining their admiration.⁵⁴ Kierkegaard paints an image of the crowd not like a blood-thirsty mob, wishing her downfall, but rather as a weary and well-meaning lot who feel 'sympathetic' to her getting older but also slightly awkward that their enthusiasm for her is simultaneously waning:

⁵⁰ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. p.312.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.312.

⁵² Ibid. p.312.

⁵³ 'She has become the "nations daughter"' Ibid. p313.

⁵⁴ This is like God's love that is always available... 'but unconditional, unselfish servant of truth has always had the practice of associating consistently with the people.... When the crowd sees the man every day they think "Is that all?'" Ibid. p.315.

People do wish her well...they are really angry with time, that it will make her older now when they have cosily settled down into the admiration's habit of thinking that she should always remain eighteen years old...and no-one considers that this whole thing may be balderdash that is totally out of place, at least in esthetics, since her era will really begin with the metamorphosis.⁵⁵

Habit, says Kierkegaard, may deceive us but it cannot 'defraud the original'. The 'fraud of habit' is that, although I seem to be the same and even saying the same things, in fact, I am very changed. It is not what is said but *how* it is said that changes; it no longer retains the same enthusiasm or expectation. The habit of the crowd in admiring the actress changes nothing of her qualities, says Kierkegaard, but it makes her metamorphosis more difficult. The 'onstage tension' is less than it had been at the beginning.⁵⁶ At 16, the crowd's admiration was guaranteed but at 30 it is not. Nonetheless, H freely and willingly subjected herself to their tepid admiration. This very difficulty is what made the metamorphosis possible.⁵⁷

I will recall once more the statement from Kierkegaard about being close to being in two places at once in that momentary passion which is 'the highest pitch of subjectivity.' For Wahl such a moment is also the point at which tension reaches its limit that a level of reconciliation is possible:

Par le paradoxe, l'existant se trouve au degré extrême, au degré le plus aigu de l'existence. Plus la tension augmente, plus augmente l'intériorité...C'est à ce moment que l'intériorité atteindra son plus haut point, quand une l'intériorité passionnée sera en contact avec une incertitude objective, choisira l'objectivement incertain et le risque, se déchirera sur la croix du paradoxe et y trouvera sa paix.

Through the paradox, the existing individual finds himself at the extreme point, the highest pitch of existence. The greater the tension, the greater the inwardness...It is at the moment where inwardness reaches its highest point, when passionate inwardness comes into contact with objective uncertainty, that it will, in choosing what is both objectively uncertain and dangerous, tear itself down from the cross of the paradox and find its peace.⁵⁸

The second time, the actress could not rely on the crowd to produce the tension on which she would rest. She had to create it herself. She did this through that inward movement,

⁵⁵ Ibid p.318.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.315

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.320

⁵⁸ J. Wahl, Jean. *Etudes Kierkegardiennes*. Paris: library philosophique J. Vrin, 1949. p.359.

through passion. At the point where she was the least supported by the crowd, when they least believed that she could still play Juliet and where she found herself entirely alone, only then could she surpass herself.

• • •

What the actress did in order to succeed in her metamorphosis was to make a decision which, like Abraham's, was a 'private undertaking'. There was no external sign of it. In *Crisis*, the subject who decided, who took upon herself to both produce and to bear the weight of the onstage tension, in order to effect the metamorphosis, was neither the actress H, nor Juliet. She was neither 16 nor 30. She seems to exist nowhere. In the same way, it is difficult to say precisely where or when the transformation took place. It was effected not in the usual sense of metamorphosis as a passage through distinct stages. It is as though the decisive moment of the metamorphosis, that is its inception, was already present in the actress at 16. At 30, when it was 'decisively' acted upon, there is another moment of decision. The actress H, via the role of Juliet made the metamorphosis by virtue of a decision which again like Abraham's leap seemed to 'take place' not at one definable point but rather in that strange temporality or movement that has been called 'the moment' in relation to Abraham. It was, like Abraham's leap, a 'more intensive return to the beginning.' At the same time it was a transformation.

Chapter 7: Repetition

What has been described so far in relation to metamorphosis, can also apply in many ways to Abraham: the containment of turmoil within a seemingly hermetic exterior, the peculiar temporality of the instant of decision and the more intensive return to the beginning. Abraham was only asked once to do what he did (he could only be asked once) and, as far as I know, no one else has ever been asked to do the same thing. The actress H, however, was able to determine whether she could do the same thing twice. The second time was clearly not any simple reduplication of the first. The first and the second time would appear to be what Kierkegaard would call a ‘repetition’ but, as is characteristic of him, not in any straightforward sense of the word. What is at stake in the repetition is nothing less than freedom, one which requires that the actress can ‘obtain sufficient weight’ upon herself. It is only ‘under pressure that she is free and has gained freedom’. The first time such weight was more or less guaranteed for the young actress but the second time it was not.

In order to examine further what Kierkegaard means by this category of repetition and what its implications are for an investigation into the metamorphosis of the actress, I will firstly turn to a text called appropriately *Repetition*.

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A book’s title may reveal something of the content. However, the title of *Repetition*, with its subtitle: *a venture in experimenting psychology*, written under the name of Constantin Constantinius, gives little away. After reading the book, I felt that it was myself, the reader, who was the subject of this experimenting. It is not until the end that I realised that if I had expected to discover what ‘repetition’ means by reading this book, then I has been entirely mistaken. Kierkegaard says that he does not want to insult the readers’ intelligence by explaining it.

In one sentence, which is as near to a description as I found, he tells us that ‘Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected

has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.⁵⁹ The term repetition, then, has some relation to the Greek notion of recollection. In the light of this investigation into the metamorphosis of the actress, this holds some promise. Perhaps the notion of ‘recollection forward’ can be related to that peculiar temporality discussed in the previous chapter.

The idea of ‘recollection’ is presented in Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo* where Socrates discusses the problem of the acquisition of knowledge: if we seek the truth about that which we do not know, then how do we recognise truth when we find it? The only possibility is if we already know it already but have forgotten it. If a person seems to know something without having been taught it in this life then that knowledge must come from a previous life. However, if a person knows something already then they have no need to learn it. Plato’s theory of recollection aims to overcome this impasse. Plato’s dialogues present the Socratic method of knowledge acquisition through questioning, called the ‘maieutic’ method.⁶⁰ Through dialogue, both parties would further their understanding and draw out innate but forgotten knowledge. The maieutic method encouraged the individual not to look outside themselves for answers but within. The form of dialogue also allowed for contradictory voices and opinions to be presented, leading the reader, again, to think for him or herself.

Although the Socratic method and the dialectical strategy appealed strongly to Kierkegaard, for him truth could not be the product of either recollection or historical accumulation, where the past was preserved in the present as a retrievable source. Instead, the discovery of truth was only possible in a complete transformation of understanding, one which constituted a total break from every form of knowledge previously relied on. ‘The moment’, that category of transition, which has such radically decisive potential, is the point at which such a break can occur.

What Kierkegaard is concerned with in *Repetition* is how such change is possible. The entity which effects or undergoes such transformation is the existing individual and as such there must be some kind of continuity in that entity otherwise, he says, life would dissolve ‘into an empty, meaningless noise’⁶¹

⁵⁹ S. Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983. p.131.

⁶⁰ Giving birth to knowledge by guiding it into life as a midwife does with a child.

⁶¹ S. Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983. p.149.

experiment

The author of *Repetition* decides to conduct an experiment. He attempts to duplicate a trip to Berlin that he had previously made. Travelling in a stagecoach for 36 hours, he says the conditions were so cramped and uncomfortable that the occupants seemed to be ‘worked together into one body’. He thought to himself: ‘God knows if you can endure it, if you actually will get to Berlin, and in that case if you will ever be human again, able to disengage yourself in the singleness of isolation, or if you will carry a memory of your being a limb on a larger body’⁶². On arriving in Berlin, he went to the lodgings that he had stayed in previously and describes them as follows

One climbs the stairs to the first floor in a gas-illuminated building, opens a little door, and stands in the entry. To the left is a glass door leading to a room. Straight ahead is an anteroom. Beyond are two entirely identical rooms, identically furnished, so that one sees the room double in the mirror. The inner room is tastefully illuminated. A candelabra stands on a writing table; a gracefully designed armchair upholstered in red velvet stands before the desk. The first room is not illuminated. Here the pale light of the moon blends with the strong light from the inner room. Sitting in a chair by the window, one looks out on the great square, sees the shadows of passers by hurrying along the walls; everything is transformed into a stage setting. A dream world glimmers in the background of the soul.⁶³

Some things had changed since last time (his landlord, for instance, had married) but nevertheless, he went to the theatre and did all of the things he had done before but realised that even though he tried to repeat everything exactly as before, what he thought of as repetition wasn’t possible; it was a different experience. He still held out hope that his return home could offer a repetition of sorts but instead he discovered his house in a state of upheaval; his servant who had been spring-cleaning in his absence had not expected his prompt arrival. The problem was, he concluded, that he had been prey to a confusion; repetition must be found not externally but within the individual.⁶⁴ He could quite well have stayed in the same place and effected a repetition as go to all that trouble. In a supplement to *Repetition*, a draft of Kierkegaard’s writing (for *Johannes Climacus*), remarks:

In reality as such, there is no repetition. This is not because everything is different, not at all. If everything in the world were completely identical, in reality there would be no repetition, because reality is only in the moment.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid. p.150-151.

⁶³ Ibid p.151.

⁶⁴ Ibid . [supplement] p.304.

⁶⁵ As is pointed out in the footnotes, the term moment here is used in the way that Hegel would use it, as a vanishing element, factor, or particular in a whole. Ibid [Supplement] p.275.

Neither does repetition occur in what Kierkegaard refers to as 'ideality'. Ideality is whatever is expressed in language and, no matter how eloquent it does so, it can never be the actuality that it attempts to describe. It may appear to repeat itself and if the same thing occurs repeatedly at different moments of time, then it is easy to assume that it is, in fact, repeating itself. However, the fact that it appears more than once is sufficient to say that it is not the same; those instances are differentiated through time as the first, second, third and so on.

It is natural to assume that in repetition there would be an occasion or action that can be thought of as 'the first', and as such is without precedent. The second time would, by conventional logic, rely on the first to inform it. In Kierkegaard's terms, however, a repetition is not 'the second' (or third or fourth) in the usual sense. Instead it is a return to the first state. Such a return retains the originality of the first, indeed it is *as if for the first time*, not as a simple reduplication but as that *more intensive* return to the beginning. This is what constitutes change as qualitative, that is a change in kind, rather than quantitative. It is like a revolution in perspective, a radical break not constituted by a progression, the passage of time, amassing of knowledge and so on, but rather like the movement which Sartre calls 'a folding back', a movement which, he says, determines subjectivity for Kierkegaard:

[...] *knowledge* cannot register this obscure and inflexible *movement* by which scattered determinations are elevated to the status of being and are gathered together into a tension which congers on them...a synthetic meaning; subjectivity is temporalization itself; it is *what happens to me*, what cannot be but happening. It is myself in so far as I can only be born to adventure [...]⁶⁶

A repetition then, in Kierkegaard's terms, cannot rely on the first to inform it. It must always, if it truly is to be a repetition, be as *though for the first time*. The actual first time is a coming into existence of something that did not exist before. It is the 'beginning' and as such is of concern to Kierkegaard specifically in *Philosophical Fragments* (along with *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*). In these texts, he questions how history can inform us on doctrines of Christianity that are underpinned by such paradoxical notions as the incarnation or the resurrection. He sets out to propose that knowledge must be discovered not only theoretically but practically, in life as it is lived subjectively.

⁶⁶ David Wood quoting Sartre in 'Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard' in J. Rée and J. Chamberlain (Eds). *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. p 60.

In a chapter of *Philosophical Fragments* called 'Is the Past More Necessary than the Future?', Kierkegaard asks: 'What is the change of coming into existence?' Between this chapter and the last, which had been about Jesus Christ, says Kierkegaard, '1843 years have passed'. What change does the passage of time comprise of? Conventional wisdom would say that time brings a great deal; that knowledge is gained through progress. History can tell whether Christ existed as a real person, but no matter how thorough the research it cannot uncover whether or not he really was the son of God.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard says that if, for example, a plan is made and when it comes into existence it is changed then it is not the original plan that comes into existence but another one. However, even if the plan is realised exactly as it was made, seemingly it would come into existence unchanged. But, says Kierkegaard, the very process of coming into existence means that it is not the same plan. The change of coming into existence is a change from *not existing* to *existing*: a change not of essence but of being. The transformation of *non-being* to *being* is the transition from possibility to actuality. However, all possibility whether taken up or not, 'turns out to be nothing the moment it becomes actual, for possibility is annihilated by actuality'. Whatever comes into existence therefore cannot be necessary for if it was it could not be annihilated. Not only that but what is necessary does by definition not come about through freedom and for Kierkegaard 'all coming into existence occurs in freedom':

All coming into existence is suffering and the necessary cannot suffer...cannot suffer the suffering of actuality. The change of coming into existence is actuality, the transition takes place in freedom...The future has not occurred as yet, but it is not, because of that, less necessary than the past, inasmuch as the past did not become necessary by having occurred, but on the contrary, by having occurred, it demonstrated that it was not necessary...the past has indeed come into existence, coming into existence is the change, in freedom, of becoming actuality...⁶⁷

Freedom then, precedes actuality. Freedom, the infinite possibility of decision, is annihilated in assuming the responsibility that freedom bestows on us. To suffer is to come into existence as subject, that is determined, not free, and yet to do so out of freedom.

To come into being out of freedom is to exist as though for the first time, unhindered by convention. However, it is also to be without guidance or anchor. To follow in another's

⁶⁷ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.72 . In the Historical Introduction, Tennemann states that the transition from possibility to actuality is change, something that Kierkegaard also refers to as a 'qualitative leap' p.ix.

footsteps is, after all, reassuring and many would prefer such predictability to the danger of setting off into the unknown, no matter how thrilling that prospect may be. The author Johannes Climacus, attempts such an unknown journey when he reappears in a text which is entitled *Johannes Climacus* as well as being ‘authored’ by him (in the third person). This text has the subtitle *de omnibus dubitandum est* (one must doubt everything). Johannes Climacus tries, as Descartes did, to rid himself of all preconceived knowledge and to start from scratch like an apprentice philosopher learning his trade.

how to begin?

Johannes Climacus continues a thread of discussion from *Philosophical Fragments* which is concerned with the ‘beginning’ or the original as the highest and best.⁶⁸ Johannes is troubled with the question of how philosophy begins. How does a philosopher know that it is with him that philosophy or *a philosophy* begins? How does he know when he has become a philosopher? At what point does he know enough to say ‘now I am going to start to think by myself in my own original thoughts?’ In short, how is it possible to begin at all ?

Johannes Climacus describes how he tries to discover what the task for his thinking would be, if he is to be a thinker at all. Eventually he discovers a thesis which ‘would come to play a decisive role in his life. The thesis became for his life what in other respects a name frequently is in a person’s history – everything can be said in all brevity by mentioning this name... What made him even more enthusiastic was the connection usually made between this thesis and becoming a philosopher’. Although the thesis is not overtly mentioned it is indicated that it is ‘Everything must be doubted’. What follows in the text is a discussion of three statements that he had heard repeatedly in relation to his thesis: (1) *philosophy begins with doubt*; (2) *in order to philosophise one must have doubted* and (3) *modern philosophy begins with doubt*.⁶⁹

The middle statement ‘*in order to philosophise one must have doubted*’, sums up the difficulty. In order to doubt I must already have enough knowledge to exercise that doubt upon, (I must have already philosophised) and yet in order to start philosophising I must begin with doubt.

In what appears to be a conclusion, Johannes says:

⁶⁸ For my purposes here, I will refer to the author not as Kierkegaard but as Johannes Climacus or Johannes. If it is in italics I am referring to the title of the book and not the ‘author’. It is less clumsy to do so than to say ‘Kierkegaard’ in *Johannes Climacus* and so on.

⁶⁹ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.132.

I cannot know even whether doubting is a preparation [...] I am left to myself; I have to do everything on my own responsibility. Even though I could have wished to remain a minor for yet a while longer, even though I could have wished that there would be someone to give me orders so that I might have the joy of obeying, even though I anxiously feel that I have come of age too soon, even though I feel like a girl who marries too young - well, so it must be. The thesis *de omnibus dubitandum est* has once and for all been brought into my consciousness, and I shall endeavour to think it to the best of my ability, to do what it says with all my passion. Come what may, whether it leads to everything or nothing, makes me wise or mad, I shall stake everything but shall not let go of the thought. My visionary dreams about being a follower have vanished; before I was allowed to be young, I became old; now I am sailing on the open sea. The prospects I once conjured up about the relation of this thesis to philosophy have been blocked. I do not know a thing about the relation of this thesis to anything else. I can only follow its path; like the one who rows a boat, I turn my back toward the goal.⁷⁰

This ‘conclusion’, however, was not in fact the last word on Johannes. There is a second part, *Pars Secunda*, where he tries to think *proprios auspiciis* (on his own behalf) ‘*de omnibus dubitandum est*’. This single short chapter called ‘What is it to doubt’, consists of an introduction in which Johannes ‘bade the philosophers farewell forever’ and vowed to ‘make everything as simple as possible’. Here he examines (philosophically) the question that if it is possible to arouse doubt in another through discourse, then is it not also possible to arouse faith in the same way? If doubt did not exist as a possibility within human consciousness already, then there would be no way of evoking it. Is it then possible to put doubt completely outside of consciousness? Consciousness, however, is always in relation to something that it is not. Consciousness of truth for example is always in relation to untruth. An immediate experience of truth would cancel both truth and untruth as they can only exist through reflection as duality.

Consciousness is the relating factor in what Johannes calls a triad of consciousness. It is not however the same as reflection. Reflection is *the possibility* of a relation and as such is dichotomous. Consciousness *is* the relation and as such is trichotomous in nature: ‘immediacy is reality; language is ideality; consciousness is contradiction. The moment I make a statement about reality, contradiction is present, so what I say is ideality’⁷¹

How then, asks Johannes, does consciousness discover the contradiction? The question of recollection once more is raised; how can consciousness discover something that it does not

⁷⁰ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985 p.159.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.168.

already know? Johannes proposes that the idea of recollection must also be a contradiction; it is neither ideality nor reality, but ideality and reality that *have been*. This, he says, is a double contradiction since neither ideality nor reality can ‘have been’; they are not in the past, over and finished with. Consciousness emerges through the collision of ideality and reality and such a collision is repetition not recollection: ‘As soon as the question of a repetition arises, the collision is present’.⁷² Just as ideality cannot be repeated, neither can reality:

When ideality and reality touch each other, then the repetition occurs... That the external is, that I see, but in the same instant I bring it into relation with something that also is, something that is the same and that also will explain that the other is the same. Here is the redoubling [*Fordobling*]; here is a matter of repetition. Ideality and reality collide – in what medium? In time? That is indeed an impossibility. In eternity? That is indeed an impossibility. In what, then? In consciousness – there is the contradiction.⁷³

So repetition is as if for the first time. It is this collision of ideality and reality that Johannes talks about. A collision is not something that is normally anticipated, prepared for nor is it desired. Who would not prefer to watch from the stalls as an acrobat performs gravity-defying tricks fifty feet in the air without a net, than to be in that persons position, not knowing if their next move will end in a fall? However, to take up such a precarious position is, for Kierkegaard, exactly what is needed in order for a repetition to be successful. Repetition is like that momentary passion in which I leap out of existence. Only by being the first, or acting as though I am the first can I make such a move.

In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard says that, for the Greeks, recollection:

[...] manifested itself as freedom’s consolation; only in recollection and by moving backward into it did freedom possess its eternal life. The modern view, on the other hand, must seek freedom forward, so that here eternity opens up for him as the true repetition forward.⁷⁴

⁷² S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983. [Journal Entries] p.275.

⁷³ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragment and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.171

⁷⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. New Jersey Princeton University Press. 1983.[supplement] p.317.

‘Seeking freedom forward’ means not seeking reassurance from past certainty but heading straight for the collision with no assurance: ‘when happiness ceases, when the crisis comes, freedom must press forward, not retreat.’⁷⁵

When ideality and reality collide, says Johannes, repetition occurs. This collision then, is the scene of decision. It is like that paradoxical moment where, through passion, I transcend existence. In order to ‘press forward’, as Kierkegaard says, in that ‘seeking of freedom’, a decision is necessary which looks towards the future as uncharted territory. It is, as such, a decision based on faith, that is, it is grounded in the unknowable. It is also a return to the beginning, a starting again in life, as though for the first time. This movement of repetition, describes, like the leap of faith, a decision which involves a transformation, the introduction of something completely new in that more intensive return to the beginning.

Returning to the actress, on whose ‘behalf’ this discussion on repetition was begun, is it now possible to say that her metamorphosis was a also repetition in Kierkegaard’s sense? It was only when H returned to the role of Juliet for the second time that she ‘became’ an actress, as though this were the beginning of her career, not the end (‘a woman does not become an actress in her 18th year, if she becomes that at all it’s in her 30th year’,⁷⁶ says Kierkegaard). It was also then, says Kierkegaard, that the ‘important decision’ was made.⁷⁷ The second time provided an opportunity for the ‘culmination’ of the ‘serving relation to the idea’ of ‘youthfulness’.⁷⁸ A 16 or 17 year old, says Kierkegaard, is both ‘too confident’ and ‘too coy’ and too concerned with what is going on the outside to be able to undertake such a ‘serving relation’. She may be distracted by ‘the accidentals’. Whatever is accidental is something in addition to what is ‘essential’. Those accidentals are quantitative additions that can be discarded without affecting the nature of an entity. What the actress was able to do in her maturity was ‘a conscious self-submission under the idea’. In that ‘serving relation’, says Kierkegaard, ‘the accidental is made completely impossible’.⁷⁹ The actress was not concerned with externals, but performed her role with complete inwardness: ‘wholly to serve is inwardness’, says Kierkegaard.⁸⁰ Her metamorphosis, then, did not allow any addition brought about through the passage of time. It was not only ‘a return to the first state.’ but a transformation of herself ‘in an eminent hypostasis.’⁸¹ Hypostasis is a

⁷⁵ S. Kierkegaard. *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997 p.317.

⁷⁶ Ibid.p.306.

⁷⁷ Ibid.p.306.

⁷⁸ Ibid.p.322.

⁷⁹ Ibid.p.323.

⁸⁰ Ibid.p.323.

⁸¹ Ibid. p.322

telling term for Kierkegaard to use here. It refers to the effect of gravity on the flow of blood in the body, but also in theological terms it refers to the single person of Christ, as opposed to him as a duality (both human and divine). This return to the beginning the actress re-grounding herself as a singular individual and as such was the instigation of something that was not originally present in the youthful H. What came about in that metamorphosis was a 'rejuvenating recollecting', and as such was not a retrogressive movement but one which re-invested that beginning with more potential than before. She was not 'happy' in the sense of that young girl, she could not look for consolation in the past. She too had to 'press forwards'. At the same time it was as though, despite the passage of time, in her metamorphosis, she had not grown older but re-inhabited her younger self with a renewed perspective, one whose gaze was fixed without wavering on that inward movement towards the point where ideality and reality collide.

It is the contradiction that is inherent in every task in life that one does for the first time. Even if thousands have done it before me, I will have my 'first time' and therefore be a pioneer in my own life. However, through habit I might forget what that first entailed. Repetition, in Kierkegaard's terms, has nothing to do with habit but as that return to the beginning, as though for the first time, I must forget everything I knew and discard everything I thought I could rely on. This is clear in the example of the acrobat. No matter how many times she climbs the ladder, she cannot trust that this time she will not fall. The danger is present every time and yet she goes up there and performs in mid-air.

Interlude

Fourteen years of life provides a lot for a woman to both enjoy and endure. This living, which H has undergone (and continued to undergo), we can know little about. It will have left its residue on her countenance; a nuance of expression, illumination of the eyes or in small creases that are beginning to form in her skin through habits of personality. Has she borne the pain of childbirth or has she borne the opposite pain, of not giving birth when she wanted to or even of losing a child? Is she loved by friends and fulfilled in her work? Does she love her husband? Is she secretly in love with someone else? Has she lost her parents? Whatever H has lived through in those years, despite any external signs, we will not know just by looking at her ⁸²

So here she is, the 30 year-old H in her dressing room, getting ready to appear on stage as the 13 year old heroine. She is touching up her make-up and repeating her lines. She has learnt some relaxation techniques and uses them now, breathing deeply, trying to keep thoughts of disaster at bay. It would be right to wonder what delusion possessed her to believe that, relying merely on the fragile suspension of disbelief afforded by theatricality and artifice, she can realise such a retrogressive transformation. How can she carry such a ludicrous task off? It is a well-known trick in pantomime to have an older person pretending to be a child or the deluded sister who thinks she is as young and pretty as Cinderella, but these are the grotesques of theatre!

Why make such a commotion? Everyone knows that Juliet is supposed to be 13 and is never played by a 13 year old. The part demands an actress of experience and the audience will think nothing of it.

Despite her experience, she is always nervous before a performance, but never as much as this time. Several thoughts come to mind:

⁸² Johanne Luise Heiberg wrote an autobiography was called *A Life Relived in Recollection*. I never found it in English but found this reference to it in Danish: Heiberg, Johanne Luise. *Et Liv gjenoplevet i Erindringer*. 4 Dle. Kjøbenhavn, 1891.

i

She has her curtain call. The stage-hand comes to her dressing room to find her, he sees her slumped over the chair. She has fainted and feels ill, too ill to go on. She can hardly speak...She is a good actress but is she good at deception? And then what? The next night and the next, would she do the same?

ii

She could go on to the stage, courageous and upright and say, “ Ladies and Gentleman, I have something to tell you. I am very sorry that I am unable to perform for you this evening. From this moment on I will no longer be an actress. A statement will be released where I will explain all. I thank you all most sincerely for all of your support. Please ask at the box office for a refund”.

iii

Her understudy! Of course, she can do it. She can take over, right now. She will go and ask her to do it this moment. She can then just disappear and let her take over. She is nearer Juliet’s age anyway and prettier than H. Altogether a more convincing Juliet. I will be doing the public a favour.

iv

H has an actress friend, one who is close in age and physique to her, perhaps a little fairer and more voluptuous but with make up and lighting and good corsetry she could pass. She knows Juliet’s lines off by heart. She has long wished to play that part but has lost all hope of doing so especially now that Luise has been asked do it. There is only room for one Juliet in Copenhagen’s theatre. She is not at all jealous of her friend’s success but quite fascinated to see her act. She is sure to be in the audience now. This could be her chance at last. What a wonderful solution, and an act of generosity to boot.⁸³

It is possible that such notions went through the mind of the actress whilst she was in her dressing room, one after the other, even all at once. Who can say? The scenarios above are merely my own fictitious imaginings. I was merely trying to put myself in her place.

The most anxiety-provoking thought of all is to carry on. And yet, somehow, to carry on it is also the most calming thought; for H to play Juliet as though she is totally happy to do it,

⁸³ This is of course my own imitation of the section in *Fear and Trembling* where Kierkegaard imagines the alternative scenarios for Abraham’s story.

as though she herself is Juliet, and has never been anyone else. This, it seems, is what she does.

Chapter 8: Anxiety

L'existant possède ce que les hommes de notre temps ont si rarement: le caractère d'authenticité, de jeunesse sérieuse. Il y a en nous une source jaillissante dont nous pouvons entendre le léger bruit - léger et profond - quand le reste de création fait silence; dans le doux et invincible bruissement de cette source réside Dieu.

The one who exists possesses that which men of our times have so rarely; the character of authenticity, a serious youthfulness. There is a source which flows in us and in which, when the rest of creation falls silent, a faint sound is audible - soft and deep; in the gentle and invincible murmur of this source resides God.⁸⁴

In the last chapter, it was concluded that the metamorphosis of the actress was effected through repetition, in the very particular sense that Kierkegaard uses the term. It was said that repetition is that 'collision' of ideality and reality. How is it possible to 'prepare' for such a movement? If subjective decision is involved at all, and from the last chapter alone, it is apparent that in the case of the actress it is, then this collision does not simply occur without warning. The subject must in some way apprehend the collision. She (the actress) must understand that the direction she must take is forward into this unknown and that she cannot retreat. In this chapter, I will look at the state of anxiety as a preparation for such a move. Kierkegaard presents anxiety as privileged above all other subjective states in that it alone enables the individual to move towards and through the 'collision' and in doing so bring about fundamental transformation.

The prerequisite of decision, in the sense that I have been using the word (as the leap of faith, repetition and so on), is anxiety. Remember that Kierkegaard says that it was the anguish which was so instrumental in Abraham's trial. For Kierkegaard, however, anxiety is what the individual seeks to avoid in any decision and as such avoids decision in the real sense, that is an irrevocable turning around.⁸⁵

in the wings

On the few occasions that I happen to mention to someone that I am reading Kierkegaard, the response is sometimes a barely repressed shudder, sometimes a pitying look. I have heard tales of people going mad through reading him and once saw a film where students of

⁸⁴ J. Wahl, *Etudes Kierkegardiennes*. Paris: library philosophique J. Vrin, 1949. p.262.

⁸⁵ 'the subjective individual wants to evade the pain and crisis of decision', S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1974. p.129.

Kierkegaard became vampires.⁸⁶ For a long time, I could understand intellectually at least why such a response might come about but did not experience it myself. I thought that the various challenges I had faced in life had made me resilient, so that I had a certain kind of courage. Perhaps this was true for some situations but it was only when I finally read *The Concept of Anxiety* that I realised I was ill prepared for the kind of ordeal that Kierkegaard had in mind. I understood then why the mention of his name struck fear into the sturdiest of souls.

Anxiety, says Kierkegaard, is ‘not just pre-sentiment – all existence makes me anxious’. It is not an infirmity to be cured by rest or therapy. I am born into it and it is part of me. Anxiety does not derive from anything but is always present, even in a latent form. It is ‘a threat to the foundation and centre of ones existence’ and at the same time, for Kierkegaard, a privileged emotional state which can encourage transformation of the highest kind.⁸⁷

I can dream of a life containing all the wonderful things imaginable (no-one ever plans for disasters) but nonetheless with this dreaming comes malaise. What if something goes wrong? If something specific presents itself, such as an interview for a job, then I may well become anxious in the ordinary sense. What Kierkegaard means by anxiety, however, is not in relation to anything in particular. In the productive and privileged sense that he employs the word, anxiety must be in the face of all possibility; everything that is both imaginable and unimaginable, the terrible along with the good. This infinite possibility is also nothing; it has no name and there exists no means to describe it.⁸⁸

In anxiety then, I do not discriminate. I do not select from amongst those possibilities the one that I wish to see as my own potential but see all of existence as possibility. A state of anxiety may evoke ideas to rely on such as a memory of past experience or ‘fate’ and suchlike but no sooner has it done so then, says Kierkegaard, it will ‘eradicate precisely what it brings forth’.⁸⁹ While anxiety takes all certainty away, it does not, however, produce

⁸⁶ A. Ferrara, *The Addiction*. Pathe Distribution Ltd. US, 1998.

⁸⁷ P. Tillich and R. May quoted in Historical Introduction of S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p.xvii.

⁸⁸ ‘Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eyes as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. Further than this, psychology cannot and will not go. In that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty’ Ibid p61. With regards to nothing, if the object of anxiety is a ‘something’ rather than nothing then no transformation can take place.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p.159.

the paralysis of indecision but rather, through anxiety, the subject moves towards the decisive moment.

In anxiety, I am confronted with the ‘dizziness of freedom’, a freedom which is ‘entangled’, says Kierkegaard. After all, an individual in freedom is free to decide but unable to exercise that freedom except by deciding. Through decision, I freely subject myself to bearing the weight of responsibility of that decision, with all of its, as yet, unknown consequences. Freedom, then carries out its own execution, by cutting off its own infinite possibility, it becomes limited and finite. The idea that possibility is light is often heard, says Kierkegaard, but possibility is the ‘weightiest of all categories’.

The actress in *Crisis*, says Kierkegaard, is anxious ‘in the wings’ or when she is ‘back home in her study’. There, he says, she has ‘no weight upon her’. She knows from experience that she will be happy onstage and this time should be no different but she still has to step out of the wings: ‘the very weight gives her lightness, and the pressure gives her the soaring flight. There is not a trace of anxiety...’⁹⁰

Onstage she will bear the ‘weight of Juliet’s intense complexity’⁹¹, the ‘weight of all those eyes’,⁹² but it is there also ‘under pressure, that she is free and has gained freedom’⁹³. The second time the crowd did not help her, they made the metamorphosis more difficult. She was no longer like the Court Chaplain in Berlin who, by giving a sermon only once in a while, could guarantee a hoard of people stampeding each other to get a seat in the audience.⁹⁴ This performance of Juliet would secure her future, it would be what made an actress of her. And yet, the crowd was ready to abandon her.

If the actress was anxious in an ordinary sense before her performance it is only to be expected; actors need to feel anxious before their performance. If not, they may be overtaken by nerves in front of the audience and the whole thing will fall apart. This time however when H was about to go on stage as Juliet was not going to be just any performance, but to repeat Kierkegaard’s words, ‘a performance in the eminent sense’; it will make the ‘genius’ manifest. For such genius, anxiety is different from the ordinary

⁹⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997 pp.312- 313.

⁹¹ Ibid. pp.312-313.

⁹² Ibid. pp.312-313.

⁹³ Ibid. pp.312-313.

⁹⁴ So much so that ‘if it so happened that someone was trampled to death in the crush, then the crush of people would be even greater next time, because it holds not only the truth but also of curiosity that “*sanguis martyrum est semen ecclesiae*” [the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church]’ Ibid. p.317.

anxiety of life. It may feel the same but its relation to ‘danger’ is the inverse. ‘Ordinary men’, says Kierkegaard feel secure until the moment of danger. Then they are anxious. As soon as the danger has passed, they are no longer anxious. The genius, by contrast, becomes anxious before and after the moment of danger. The moment itself makes the genius strong:

[Her] anxiety...lies in the moment before and after the danger, that trembling moment when [she] must converse with the great unknown, which is fate. [Her] anxiety is perhaps greatest precisely in the moment after, because the impatience of certitude always increases in inverse ratio to the brevity of the distance to victory, since there is more and more to lose the nearer one comes to victory, and most of all in the moment of victory, because the consistency of fate is precisely its inconsistency.⁹⁵

The second time the danger was greater than the first for the actress and so was the anxiety which preceded it. Anxiety though, is like a constant state of anticipation, as soon as the danger is past it returns in preparation for the next time. The situation was ‘dangerous ‘ for the actress because the crowd were nonchalant. If she had failed, it may even have confirmed their expectations and thus made them more content. H had to go against expectation in order to secure her own future as an actress, that is ‘to become’ an actress.

• • •

By assuming the responsibility of freedom, the individual succumbs to existence. This surrendering occurs in an inward movement in ‘the highest pitch of subjectivity’, through passion. If there is a wholehearted surrender, with no reserve, to ‘the everything’ (which is also nothing), then the choice is made. In passion, I allow the whole of existence to bear down on me. This deep level of inwardness is also a place where a quietening of all competing voices takes place.⁹⁶ In surrender, in suffering, in the bearing of existence, there is the movement: down and further down until there is a rising up again: *resurrection*:

In actuality, no one ever sank so deep that he could not sink deeper, and there may be one or many who sank deeper. But he who sank in all possibility – his eyes became dizzy, his eyes became confused, so he could not grasp the measuring stick that Tom, Dick, and Harry hold out as a saving straw to one sinking; his ear was closed so he could not hear what the market price of men was in his own day, did not hear that he was just as good as the majority, He sank absolutely, but then in turn he emerged from the depth of the abyss lighter than all the troublesome and

⁹⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981. p.101.

⁹⁶ ‘Take the pupil of possibility, place him in the middle of the Jutland heath, where no event takes place or where the greatest event is a grouse flying up noisily, and he will experience everything more perfectly, more accurately, more thoroughly than the man who received the applause on the stage of world- history if than man was not educated by possibility’. Ibid. p.159.

terrible things in life... I will not deny that whosoever is educated in possibility is exposed to danger...[but] the assaults of anxiety, even though they be terrifying will not be such that he flees from them. The Anxiety enters into his soul and searches out everything and anxiously torments everything finite and petty out of him, and then it leads him where he wants to go.⁹⁷

I cannot say that I have ever had such courage, the kind that Abraham undoubtedly had. The actress H, though, was not being asked to kill her son; neither was she going to be crucified. She was only performing a role in the theatre! Nonetheless, she was anxious, says Kierkegaard; she too was ‘educated in possibility’, capable of undergoing transformation. Nevertheless can it really be said that her courage is equal to Abraham’s?

altered

The word ‘danger’ seems to be an exaggeration here. The metamorphosis of the actress is a change involving an irreversible movement towards an unknown future, but given the situation, how can such a thing be considered truly dangerous?

In a footnote in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard remarks that there is a Danish word for ‘alterate’ which is used in the sense of changing, or bringing out of its original state. Another related word in Danish, *alteretet*, ‘to become altered’ also means ‘becoming frightened.’⁹⁸ There is at least an etymological relation between anxiety and transformation and *The Concept of Anxiety* takes this relation further. The meaning of conversion in Christianity is becoming aware of the fact of being a sinner. Adam, the first sinner, altered his status in the most profound sense; through sin he became man when once he was an angel. Adam became separated from God because he succumbed to physical desire. In becoming human he also becomes animal. The human being says Kierkegaard ‘is a synthesis of the angel and the beast and therefore can be in anxiety.’⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid. p.158.

⁹⁸ Ibid. fn. p.59.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p.49. When I begin to think about these biblical stories I realised that despite having been a practicing Catholic in my early life, I do not believe that I ever knew what they really meant and if I did I had forgotten. For instance, I could not remember whether Jesus always knew that he was the son of God or why it was at that particular time that we know of as 2000 yr BC, God decided to send his son to earth. I asked my father who is a practicing Catholic but as he could not say for sure, he asked the Monsignor at his church. The Monsignor said that he believed that no-one knew why Jesus was sent to earth at that particular time. He thought that Jesus realised that he was the son of God when he reached ‘the age of reason’ (my father and another Catholic friend that I asked also believed this). The Monsignor asked my father why I wanted to know (he had never seen me at Mass!) and he told the Monsignor that I was studying philosophy. ‘Ah’, said the Monsignor, ‘then she ought to go and ask the theologians in Brompton Oratory’. It seemed obvious from this that for practicing Christians, dates and facts are of no real consequence to their practice. Someone who knows the theory of how Titian painted his great

Through his own actions, Adam bestowed upon himself a life where he would be irrevocably separated from God. Adam's sin, as original sin, is something that Christians say all human beings inherit but it is not something to be worn like a family heirloom. For Kierkegaard, it is something that I must take responsibility for, as though I am Adam. This realisation of sin, of my individual responsibility for it and for my own earthbound existence which separates me from God, is conversion. Conversion means, in effect, to become a sinner. Just as Adam would have contemplated his future on a previously uninhabited earth, true conversion is a turning around to face the future, the unknown that awaits me:

The difference between Adam and the subsequent individual is that for the latter the future is reflected more than for Adam... [for whom]...the future seems to be anticipated by the past or by the anxiety that the possibility is lost before it has been.¹⁰⁰

What Adam gained through sin is freedom, 'the possible is the future and the future is for time the possible'.¹⁰¹

In committing the 'Original Sin', Adam forges his destiny in freedom, to be abandoned to a life as a limited and finite being who does not know the source of his existence. The moment of Original Sin, says Sartre, restores meaning to 'original being'. If Being was the contradictory unity of finite and infinite, the contradiction in this unity remained concealed. Sin not only makes this contradiction re-appear but is what constitutes and determines it: 'the Self and God appear' says Sartre:

[...] what he (Kierkegaard) called sin is... the super session of the (pre-Adamite) state by the advent of freedom and the impossibility of retreat. Thus the wit of subjective life – what he calls passion, and Hegel calls pathos – is nothing other than the freedom that institutes the finite and is lived in finitude as inflexible necessity.¹⁰²

The acknowledgement of sin for Kierkegaard puts us into a relation with God as the source of salvation from earthly existence and for this reason becoming conscious of sin is a

masterpieces does not necessarily make a great painter. Likewise, artists do not necessarily make great theorists of their art. Still, it seems strange that cultures may be built on ideas that are only vaguely understood, if they are understood at all by the population, either in practice or theory.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.91.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p.91.

¹⁰² J.P. Sartre. 'Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal' in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1974. p.160.

positive step. If there was no element of 'spirit', if there was only what Kierkegaard calls 'paganism', then it would be impossible to sin. Consciousness of sin is the recognition of absolute difference from God, whom I now turn and face rather than look away in ignorance, even if I do not know what I am looking for or at what I am looking.

Nevertheless, anxiety does not come from the ability to decide between good or evil, but from the fact of being able to decide, or having to decide at all. It is the 'how' of the decision that takes precedence over the 'what'. For example, Kierkegaard says that it is better for a 'pagan' to pray 'in truth' to a 'false' God than for a Christian to pray in 'untruth' to the 'true' God. If the 'how' is accomplished then the 'what' will come. In a logical system says Kierkegaard, possibility passes over to actuality without anxiety; potentiality goes towards its end without resistance just as a seed will grow into a plant if it is not disturbed. Freedom does not belong to such a system, he says, but instead belongs to existence.

Being able to decide means being able to refuse or accept one potential, one's 'end' or *telos* in life. This being able to decide requires an 'intermediate term', says Kierkegaard, between possibility and actuality, and this is 'anxiety'. The intermediate term that has so far punctuated this whole discussion has been 'the moment'. Once again, it appears in another form: 'Anxiety is the moment', says Kierkegaard, 'it points towards what follows.'¹⁰³

Anxiety, then, like passion, is the *momentary*, present at the most extreme point. This point which is also the turning point where it is not possible to 'sink deeper', the moment when the actress finds herself completely alone at 'the highest pitch of subjectivity'.

Figuratively, I can think of 'anxiety' like a lock on a canal, which it is necessary to go through in order to take a boat to another level and to continue on an otherwise inaccessible route. Anxiety is not only this mechanism but provides the force or the momentum with which to turn it. In reality though, nothing could be detected as a medium of change in the metamorphosis of the actress. No-one could say from the outside if she really had passed through it and if indeed she was set on a new path once and for all. What can be said is that in the moment of danger itself, onstage, the actress did not give a backwards glance to already rehearsed certainties. She had experienced the anxiety 'in the wings' and had not tried to avoid it. Instead, through assuming of the weight of onstage tension (which she herself produced), she arrived at the moment of danger where all anxiety dissipated. She

¹⁰³ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981 p.49 and p.81.

played the role of Juliet at the age of 30 as though for the very first time. No director could have instructed her. She must have arrived, through her own efforts at that more intensive return to the beginning. She faced the crisis of decision, and in doing so decided her own destiny. She did this *freely*, out of freedom. Thus she prepared for her metamorphosis in anxiety, and through anxiety she effected this transformation that has been called a repetition or the leap. This much and more indicates how she gave her remarkable performance.

Chapter 9: Crisis

The actress H effected a metamorphosis in the way that has been described, through the role of Juliet, as repetition, in anxiety and passion. This performance, to which Kierkegaard dedicated his article *The Crisis and the Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, was indeed a feat worthy of attention. However, even if this interpretation shows that it was quite an extraordinary event, it is still difficult to assign this performance with the same sense of urgency that Abraham's trial evoked. The title of the article is to do with 'crisis' and, as such, does it not suggest an event that is much more radically decisive than the performance of the actress could possibly be? The nature of the 'crisis' at the heart of the article and the anguish that Kierkegaard put himself through in deciding whether or not to publish still remains unclear. The title includes the word 'crisis' twice and yet no-where in the article itself is a crisis as such referred to directly. This chapter will examine what is really at stake in this 'little article' for Kierkegaard.

The first 'crisis' of the title refers to a crisis in general. As such, it can be asserted that what Kierkegaard means by this are the political and cultural changes that coincided with the writing and publication of *Crisis* in 1847-8. At that time, there was a great deal of instability and change in Denmark. The French Revolution and its repercussions, including the Dano-Prussian War, prompted Kierkegaard to see his country as being in a state of disintegration and literally on the edge of downfall. Political, religious and philosophical ideas which he felt to be profoundly antithetical to his thinking began to dominate the scene. Political groups began to attempt to rally individuals together into collective struggle (it was in 1848, that Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*). In Christianity too the people's church was thriving as a collective means of worship.¹⁰⁴

Equally, German philosophy was beginning to dominate the intellectual landscape in Europe and subsequently in Denmark itself. Hegel began to have a huge influence in philosophy. Hegel's spectacular intelligence, difficulty and profundity as a philosopher was

¹⁰⁴ The commentary in Kierkegaard's journals mentions that Kierkegaard saw this period as an age of disintegration or of crisis. S. Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals : A Selection*, London: Penguin Books, 1996. p.350.

not in doubt for Kierkegaard. The problem, for Kierkegaard, was that he believed Hegel was trying to systematise existence and in doing so was attempting to stand outside of the system he himself had created, thus assuming an authority and objectivity that no human being can claim, not even the greatest of thinkers.

With the increasing influence of Hegel, Kierkegaard feared for the fate of Danish philosophy which he said, was different from German philosophy. It did not seek explanation in the way that German philosophy did but instead began with ‘...the proposition that there are many things between heaven and earth which no philosophy has explained’.¹⁰⁵ In another journal entry, he describes Danish philosophy as:

[...] having perhaps discovered that there is something different and something more, something it provisionally calls the innermost behind, or what lies behind innermost Being. As soon as it discovers what this is, or, as my barber more correctly put it as soon as it gets behind there, it will gain the European reputation which Niels Rasmussen had intended for it. This, in my barber’s opinion, one may safely dare to hope, confident in the extraordinary powers of Danish philosophy.¹⁰⁶

It is for these reasons that Kierkegaard was so determined to insist on the ‘single individual’ and, as I suggested previously, that he was convinced to write once again in ‘indirect’ authorship at this time

The second crisis of the article’s title is a crisis in particular, ‘the crisis in the life of an actress’. Certainly, the actress endured something when she returned to the role of Juliet and certainly it was ordeal for her but, despite all that has been described in relation to her, is what she went through a crisis in the true sense of the word? Why does Kierkegaard call the situation of the actress a ‘crisis’ and not ‘metamorphosis’ since the latter is what is ostensibly of concern in the article?

The decision to publish the article, as I mentioned at the start of Part Two, threw Kierkegaard into a quandary but it was not the first time that the decision to publish or not to publish a particular work had this effect on him. The case of *Crisis*, however, illustrates quite clearly what rests on such a decision.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. [44 V A 46], p.181.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. [III B 192], p.149.

¹⁰⁷ In Walter Lowrie’s Introduction to *Training in Christianity*, he explains that the decision to publish that text was also fraught with ‘the agony of indecision’. Kierkegaard was so troubled by the news that Regine Olsen’s father had died that he suffered auditory hallucinations, which in the end decided him to publish. Lowrie remarks that Kierkegaard would have been sufficiently aware that those ‘voices’ were

In *Pierre or the Ambiguities* (published in 1852) Herman Melville, in a surreal and magnificent observation on the currents of thought and literary styles of the day, discusses how the 'hero', Pierre, makes various forays into religion, writing, a love affair and so on. In one section 'Pierre as Juvenile Author', Melville describes the very anxieties that beset an author on publishing their work:

It is well enough known, that the best productions of the best human intellects, are generally regarded by those intellects as mere immature freshman exercises, wholly worthless in themselves, except as initiatives for entering the great University of God after death. Certain it is, that if any inferences can be drawn from observations of the familiar lives of men of the greatest mark, their finest things, those which become the foolish glory of the world, are not only poor and inconsiderable to themselves, but often positively distasteful; they would rather not have the book in the room...Let not the short-sighted world for a moment imagine, that any vanity lurks in such minds; only hired to appear on the stage, not voluntarily claiming the public attention; their utmost life-redness and glow is but rouge, washed off in private with bitterest tears; their laugh only rings because it is hollow; and answering laugh is not laughter to them.¹⁰⁸

This kind of insecurity, the schism between public opinion and private endeavour, seems to accurately depict the predicament that any author can find themselves in. At the time of publishing *Crisis*, Kierkegaard would no doubt have suffered precisely from this effect, not only because he was an author who published frequently and so was always in the public eye, but because of a recent event in his life which would have still been extremely painful for him.

In 1845, Peder Ludvig Møller wrote a negative review of Kierkegaard's publication *Stages on Life's Way* (also published 1845). Kierkegaard felt Møller's critique to be unfair and ill-conceived. As Møller was also a contributor to *The Corsair*, a Danish satirical newspaper, Kierkegaard wrote two responses to Møller's article for the paper, *The Activity of a Travelling Esthetician*, which ridiculed Møller and *Dialectical Result of a Literary Police Action* where he vehemently attacked the paper and openly invited the editor to satirize him. *The Corsair* took him up on his challenge by publishing a series of deeply personal attacks on Kierkegaard. As a result, he was ridiculed in the streets of Copenhagen wherever he

part of him but they were nonetheless so terrifying for him that he felt compelled to do as they said. S. Kierkegaard. *Training in Christianity*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. p 1.1.

¹⁰⁸ H. Melville. *Pierre or the Ambiguities*. London: Penguin, 1996. p.258 .

went. ‘The Corsair Affair’ resulted in him stating that the entire episode had made him decide to give up his indirect authorship and that he was doing so of his own free will, not because he was being forced to by anyone else.

Obviously then, for Kierkegaard to publish an article about an actress, under the pseudonym ‘Inter et Inter,’ in a popular newspaper, was laying himself wide open to criticism and comment. At the same time, it must have been a risk of great significance for him; the very act of publishing itself seems to embody the whole question that is of concern in his discussion of the metamorphosis of the actress. The actress becomes an actress only in her 30th year: ‘at 30 the metamorphosis is successful’. The question can be posed of any ‘becoming’. At what point does Kierkegaard *become* religious? At what point does Johannes *become* a philosopher or indeed do I *become* anything in life? The metamorphosis of the actress was complete at 30; this was not the end but the starting point, where she could actually begin to be an actress, *beginning* in the full sense that Kierkegaard proposes.

In *Crisis*, Kierkegaard mentions the example of a ‘young man’. ‘When will he produce his best lyrical poetry?’, asks Kierkegaard:

[...] in his twentieth year? By no means. His best lyrics will come at a somewhat older age, when time has taken away the fortunate accidentals of his youthfulness so that he now relates himself to his idea purely ideally and thereby, *servicing*, also relates himself in a profound sense to his idea.¹⁰⁹

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the ‘young’ man in question here is Kierkegaard himself. Yet, what he says in relation to this ‘young man’, is almost a complete replica of his statements about the actress.

In journal entries around the time of publishing *Crisis*, Kierkegaard relates that he has been continually haunted by the thought that he would soon die and that the article may be published after his death. In 1848, Kierkegaard was 33, the age when his father had predicted all of his children would die.¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard feared that if he reneged on his resolve to ‘speak’ in direct communication then God may abandon him. It is easy to

¹⁰⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and the Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 199. p.320

¹¹⁰ At the age of twenty-four Kierkegaard’s father revealed to him that once, as a starving shepherd boy on Jutland heath, he had cursed God for his miserable situation. Although his fortunes quickly turned around, his father was haunted by the belief that all of his children would die by the age of 33, the age at which Christ died on the cross. Of his seven children only Peter and Søren survived beyond that age

imagine that for Kierkegaard, believing as he did that he was in such spiritual and mortal danger, there was an immense amount at stake in publishing what otherwise might seem quite an insignificant aesthetic 'little article'. He had, however, written it under a pseudonym for good reasons and he knew he had to be true to himself. He also wanted to dispel any idea that the attacks he had suffered through the Corsair Affair had made him 'saintly' and turned him towards Christianity. He insisted that he had always been religious from the beginning and wanted to oppose the idea that it was something a person turned to only in adversity or old age.

Publishing *Crisis* meant that Kierkegaard was also facing the prospect of his very own repetition. He had 'announced' the end of his indirect communication and that he was going to write under his own name as a religious author. Having reverted in *Crisis* to indirect communication he would have to become, once again, a religious author. This 'little article' then, was not only an occasion to talk about his admiration for the actress but, through her, to examine his own dilemma of 'becoming' a uniquely religious author. This decision was not only an aesthetic one, but as a Christian, it meant to decide 'before God'. Such a decision would also be a sacrifice of any remaining chance for Kierkegaard to increase recognition and respect as a literary persona. A religious author no doubt had much less appeal than an aesthetic one. Indeed, as Walter Lowrie comments in his introduction to *Training in Christianity*, 'to decide for Christ' was also to become a 'cultural alien'.¹¹¹

However, becoming religious (becoming anything) does not happen once and for all. Sartre said that Kierkegaard taught him what was entailed in calling oneself an atheist. Kierkegaard does this, says Sartre, through tracing through his writing the passage back 'from speech to speaker'. Such 'verbal alliances', he says, are 'not intelligible':

When we encounter his words, they immediately invite us to another use of language, that is to say of our own words...Kierkegaard's terms refer us to what are now called , in accordance with his precepts, the 'categories' of existence...Within each of us he offers and refuses himself, as he did in his own lifetime; he is my adventure and remains, for others, Kierkegaard, the other - a figure on the horizon testifying to the Christian that faith is a future development forever imperilled, testifying to myself that the process of becoming-an-atheist is a long and difficult enterprise.¹¹²

The character of Juliet *via* the actress H, authored by Inter et Inter, produces such a chain of such unintelligible 'alliances', and the trajectory that the reader follows in *Crisis* is back to

¹¹¹ S. Kierkegaard. *Training in Christianity*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. p.xvii.

¹¹² J.P. Sartre in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. London: New Left Books, 1974. p.168.

both Kierkegaard and ourselves as readers. Who is this actress if she is not every single individual; the individual in general as the ‘public’ or the reader and that very particular individual, Kierkegaard himself? The crisis of the actress is nothing less than the crisis of Kierkegaard and by extension it is also ours.

Finally, despite his fears, Kierkegaard does publish the article, commenting in his journals that he was glad because if he had died without doing so he was certain ‘that in the frightful and frivolous conceptual confusion of our age people would have come out and babbled something about [him] being an apostle...’.¹¹³

I can imagine Kierkegaard handing the manuscript over to the printers. The moment that he walks out of the printer’s door, it may already be too late.¹¹⁴ What did he feel like waiting for it to appear in *Faederlandt*, going to buy his copy on that Monday morning of July 24th, 1848? In fact the publication of the article created hardly a stir. Perhaps this fact, that the audience paid so little attention to it, was the very difficulty that made his transition possible, just as it did for the actress.

The idea of ‘going on stage’ can be taken to mean any kind of declaration of intent (even a private one). It is a commitment to decision, assuming a role in life, the decision to *become* something, to begin. The moment I ‘go on stage’, when there is no more time for rehearsal, I step into that space where consciousness emerges in ‘the collision of ideality and reality’ in all its contradictions. It is also onstage that the ‘danger’ strikes and that Kierkegaard tells us that the actress is at her happiest, where all anxiety disappears. To *become* in the sense that Kierkegaard proposes, is to produce my own momentum for change, to bear the full weight of responsibility for my decision and to ‘go on stage’, right into the ‘danger’ and there in that moment where I cannot sink any deeper under all of that weight to allow myself to be transformed, in joy and tranquillity.

I am reminded of Kafka’s story *A Report for an Academy*, where the narrator, an ape, tells the story of how he had been shot and taken into captivity. In a painful realisation he discovered that the only way out (he explicitly says he did not ask for freedom, only a way

¹¹³ S.Kierkegaard. *Papers and Journals : A Selection*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. [48 IX A 178] p.321 and [48 IX A 190] p.322.

¹¹⁴ According to Anthony Storm when *Training in Christianity* was published under the name of Anti-Climacus Kierkegaard decided to remove this pseudonym at the last moment and rushed to the printers, but was too late. A. Storm. Commentaries, biography, bibliography on Kierkegaard at <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/>

out) was to cease to be an ape and so he set about learning how to be a human being. He tells how he learned the habits of the men that he encountered: the handshake, the smoking of a pipe, the drinking of alcohol and so on. He tells of how a decisive moment occurs when he utters his first words:

I cried out a short and good 'Hello!' breaking into human sounds. And with this cry I sprang into the community of human beings, and I felt its echo – 'Just listen. He's talking!'- like a kiss on my entire sweat-soaked body.¹¹⁵

For that ape of Kafka's, it was a life or death situation that made him decide to 'become' a human being. Such a situation can quite rightly be called a crisis. For Kierkegaard, the danger was a matter of spiritual salvation (if he died) and of his own future as a religious author (if he lived).

krisis

A crisis occurs when things can no longer continue as before. To remain in the crisis situation is unbearable and yet I am faced with a dizzying array of escape routes. Whatever decision I make, if decision is possible, no exit can be guaranteed as the right one. In order to escape, however, retreat is no longer possible, and there no way out except through some radical means.

In medical terms, an illness reaches crisis at the very worse point of the illness before the patient turns toward recovery or death. The term crisis comes from this medical source, from the Greek *krisis* which means 'decision', from *krinein* 'decide'. 'To decide', I have already mentioned, is from *decidere*, [*de* + *caedere*, 'off' + 'to cut']. *Decidere* also means 'to determine', an act of volition. Etymologically, then, the words 'crisis' and 'decision' both come to mean the same thing: a turning point, or a point of renewal which is also a severance. Crisis comes to mean not the cause of decision but rather crisis *is* decision itself. Crisis *as* decision is the cutting off or the rupture with continuity, with the accumulation of past knowledge and experience. Such an act requires an agency of sorts, since it is an act of volition. And yet, says Derrida: 'One never meets decision or experiences it – it is something which interrupts and tears the fabric of time.'¹¹⁶ The locus of crisis becomes the

¹¹⁵ F. Kafka. *A Report for An Academy*, (E-text) found at <http://mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/kafka/reportforacademy.htm>, prepared and published by Ian Johnston, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, Canada

¹¹⁶ J. Derrida, On Responsibility; an interview with Jonathan Dronsfield, Nick Midgley, Adrian Wilding University of Warwick Journal , May issue, 1993. p.20.

locus of decision through the cutting off of familiar or reliable routes. This cutting is also the leap of Abraham and the metamorphosis of the actress. Crisis is not the end but a beginning, a rebirth. As such, it is also repetition, a more intensive return to the beginning.

All decision is 'rooted in subjectivity', says Kierkegaard. However, he says, since the subjective individual 'wants to evade some of the pain and crisis of decision', there must be no 'case in point' present at all in the moment of decision.¹¹⁷ A 'case in point' is some objective thought that serves as a distraction; a way to think away from the situation at hand.

A quantitative leap would be achieved through objective reason in the accumulation of facts and knowledge, like the chain of logic in Climacus ladder.¹¹⁸ Abraham's leap however, involves a *qualitative* transformation and as such cannot be demonstrated objectively, only performed subjectively. In the same way that any attempt to demonstrate the existence of God in an epistemological way is futile, so is any attempt to perform the qualitative leap by basing it on externals:

And how does the existence of the god emerge from the demonstration? Does it happen straight away? Is it not here as it is with the Cartesian dolls? As soon as I let go of the doll, it stands on its head. As soon as I let go of it – consequently, I have to let go of it. So also with the demonstration. So long as I am holding on to the demonstration (that is, continue to be one who is demonstrating), the existence does not emerge, if for no other reason than that I am in the process of demonstrating it, but when I let go of the demonstration, the existence is there. Yet this letting go, even that is surely something; it is, after all, *meine Zuthat* [my contribution]. Does it not have to be taken into account, this diminutive moment, however brief it is- it does not have to be long, because it is a leap. However diminutive this moment, even if it is this very instant, this very instant must be taken into account.¹¹⁹

This 'letting go' in that 'diminutive moment' seems to be like rubbing the magic lamp in a constant and continuous movement; done with total volition and with no 'buts'.¹²⁰ At some point in the movement I will forget everything except this action. The task at hand will subsume me completely and I will sink into it. This may only be for one moment, the infinitesimal blink of an eye. Perhaps that is the letting go. In such a letting go, which is neither recklessness nor thoughtless, but a decision on my part to go forward without

¹¹⁷ S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1974. p.129.

¹¹⁸ See Introduction of this text.

¹¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragment and Johannes Climacus*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985. p.42

¹²⁰ See Part One, p.18 of this text.

knowing why, then something occurs. It will be difficult then to say of such an occurrence that 'I' made it happen or at what point I did so.

In order to leap, I need to become light by means of weight. When Derrida says that decision must be 'heterogeneous to the accumulation of knowledge, otherwise there is no responsibility', the responsibility he is referring to is precisely this weight. ¹²¹

Kierkegaard asks: How do you save the man who has filled his mouth so full of food that he cannot eat and will die of hunger? Of course, you must empty his mouth of food. In the same way if a man complains that despite being very knowledgeable, his knowledge has lost all meaning for him, then a person who seeks to help him would not wish to give him even more information. However, if 'a communicator':

[...] takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it to him in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge...It is better to understand that something is so difficult that it simply cannot be understood than to understand that a difficulty is so very easy to understand. When in such an order of things the communication does not aim at making the difficulty easier, the communication becomes a taking away. The difficulty is invested with a new form and thus actually made difficult. This is communication to the person who already has found the difficulty so very easy to explain. ¹²²

If I need to become less knowledgeable in order to learn then this does not mean to be like a child again. For Kierkegaard what constitutes new knowledge is not 'new' in the sense that it is a previously unheard of piece of information, of which there are ten a penny. What is new is the position from which I view and experience the original. It is as though, as a friend once said of an experience he had, that he had been looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. When he turned it round he saw everything with a new perspective.

• • •

Kierkegaard's work consistently examines what is at stake in assuming the responsibility of freedom as an existing human being. *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, like *Fear and Trembling*, expresses this concern. A decision, in this case to become an actress, but in a more general sense to become subjective, to become a Christian, atheist,

¹²¹ See Part One for full quote. Derrida, Jacques. Nietzsche and the Machine: Interview with Jacques Derrida (interviewer Beardsworth). *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 7, Spring 1994. p.37.

¹²² S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. pp.275-6 fn.

philosopher or even human being is a decision which involves an intense kind of preparation towards the moment of crisis. Crisis, as the decisive moment, takes place in that very collision which is also existence at its most paradoxical. Anxiety produces the momentum with which to move forwards into the 'danger' and once it is reached, all anxiety dissolves. The decision has occurred. In the moment of conversion, I jump out of existence and land exactly on the same spot once more, except that I am turned around to face a view that I no longer recognise. Only from there can I proceed towards a future.

Conclusion to Part Two

This section on ‘H’, the actress in Kierkegaard’s article *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, looked at the mechanisms through which subjective decision, in its most radical sense, can be carried out. Kierkegaard’s notion of the ‘metamorphosis’ of the actress facilitated a discussion on the various components that are necessary to go through with decision: passion as the highest pitch of subjectivity, repetition as the more intensive return to the beginning and anxiety as the privileged preparatory state of decision. In this section the ‘locus’ of decision is once more subjectivity, but one which (reflecting Agamben’s state of exception in Part One), is not locatable as a fixed entity. I looked at the idea of assuming roles or *persona* through Balibar as a way of formulating what the subjective locus of decision could be. The ‘subjectivity’ in question in *Crisis* is ostensibly that of the actress via the role of Juliet, but, through examination of Kierkegaard’s dialectical approach, it is clear that ‘the actress’ is also the single individual in general and Kierkegaard in particular.

The question of what it means to ‘become an actress’ is extended through Kierkegaard to what it means to become a Christian, a writer, a philosopher and eventually a subjective individual. As Agamben says in *The Coming Community*, there is no vocation (historical, spiritual, biological and so on) that a human being *must* ‘enact or realize.’:

...if human beings were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible - there would only be tasks to be done. This does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point). There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality.*¹²³

The decision to becoming anything in particular may be made in freedom but the decision to exist, as such, has already been made *before* me. This idea of *possibility* or *potentiality*, rather than substance, is perhaps a more apt description of subjectivity than any substantial or localizable ‘entity’, any actuality or manifestation. Rather, through the cipher of the actress, I have tried to show that if ‘decisiveness adheres in subjectivity’, then subjective decision occurs on the basis of this paradoxical ‘fact of existence’.

¹²³ G. Agamben. *The Coming Community*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. p.43.

Conclusion

In this thesis, Kierkegaard's proposition that all decisiveness is 'rooted in subjectivity' is used as the starting point. I explore this proposition through two figures from Kierkegaard's work, Abraham from *Fear and Trembling* and the actress from *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*. Each of these individuals enact a particular and radical kind of decision which results in subjective transformation. Through them and their situations, described by Kierkegaard, I explore the question of whether or not subjectivity can be said to be the 'locus' of decision and if so what is the nature of such decision.

In Part One, the focus is the Biblical parable where Abraham is called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Using both Kierkegaard's reading of the parable in *Fear and Trembling* and Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard, I trace the movement of Abraham's decision through faith, that is a decision made on the basis of what Kierkegaard calls 'the absurd'. This section examines such a movement in terms of 'the moment', a paradoxical but nonetheless transitional category of temporality. Abraham's decision occurred in 'the blink of an eye', that moment which for Kierkegaard, is a coincidence of *the here and the now* and 'eternity'.

The figure of Abraham is then examined, with the aid of Agamben, through the category of 'the exception' and, through the figure of *homo sacer*, as an 'example' who is at the same time an 'exception'. The duality of the 'example' and the 'exception', co-existing in this one figure of Abraham, suggests a subjectivity which exists at the threshold of categories (legal, social and so on). In this case, the 'locus' of decision, as subjective existence, is placed at the very limits of such categorisation.

In the course of this research, as I noted in the Introduction, I have been developing an art practice that is also a form of philosophical investigation, whilst exploring new forms to present such an investigation. The discussion between 'Elena Carnell' and 'Anthony McElville', as has been made clear, is a scripted dialogue between two eminent, but fictitious philosophers played by actors. This dialogue (which as a work in itself I call 'Onlookers') explores the forms of practice through which philosophy is made public, and

the kind of knowledge that is enabled or disabled through such presentation. The dialogue is intended to be presented in a Philosophy conference setting where the audience are not aware of the fiction. I wanted the work to operate as an exploration of the nature of philosophical authority, the performance of philosophy, and of the activating of the question of decision in this particular arena. In the context of the thesis, I hoped that I could situate it so that the reader could experience it in a similar way. As well as this element of philosophical ‘performance’, I wanted the form to reflect upon the content of the dialogue. The impetus for the work was reading Agamben’s text *The Open; man and animal*. I was struck by the elliptical nature of the figures that Agamben refers to both here and elsewhere (feral children, non-citizens, *homo sacer*, people in comas etc). The dialogue emerged from a desire to hear one of them, in this instance a feral girl, talk about her own experience rather than have it appropriated and translated by the philosopher. I wondered what she would say if she were in a position to address the philosopher in his own terms, that is within philosophical discourse. I also wanted to imaginatively explore the threshold between the human and animal state that Agamben himself conceptualises as *caesura*, ‘an empty interval’, neither human nor animal life and which ‘passes first of all within man’. This notion of *caesura* seemed to me to be another name for the subjective ‘locus’ that I was trying to describe. There were several reasons why I devised the dialogue in the way that I did. I wanted the responsibility of decision, that is deciding whether the speakers were genuine, whether Eleanor was an academic, a wolf-girl and so on, to be held as much as possible by the audience. I also wanted the audience to be able to suspend disbelief, to engage with the discussion despite realising that it was ‘fake’ and eventually to enjoy being part of the narrative. The performance locates decision within subjectivity and puts into question the validity of those external categories in the context of the existing individual. For Elena, for example, it is of little consequence who or what decided her status as ‘human’, ‘animal’ or indeed ‘philosopher’. What is of significance for her, as one who occupies such uncertain ground, is her own capacity to decide ‘who’ or ‘what’ she could ‘become’ (perhaps without really ‘becoming’, or actualising that role).¹²⁴ Or, perhaps she was always certain who she was – an actress playing a part in a performance. Even as the writer or creator of this character, I cannot say for sure what motivates her.

After this DVD ‘chapter’, I return to Abraham, examining the notion of ‘obedience’ through Etienne Balibar and that of ‘the call’ through Steiner. Here, the origin of decision is examined as a ‘command’ from an unknowable source. Nonetheless, whoever hears such a

¹²⁴ One layer of this is also that Elena’s decision to ‘become’ a philosopher is echoed later in the text through Johannes Climacus.

call to obedience is not placed in a relation of mere servitude to the one who commands, but rather enters into an agreement of mutual responsibility. Obedience is, in this sense, a decision made by the subject in relation to authority, not a case of subservience. Nevertheless, the origin of the call in the story of Abraham is the unknown and unknowable God, who must remain hidden. Abraham must decide firstly whether he or she is genuinely being called by God, and secondly whether to obey such a call. The place at which such a call is heard, and the place from which it is obeyed is *interiority*, or to use Kierkegaard's term, 'inwardness'. The significance of inwardness in *Fear and Trembling* (and elsewhere in Kierkegaard's work) is that it describes subjectivity at its most interior limit; the place at which Abraham's decision in faith and the justification for his obedience was made here in the inward place, profoundly hidden even from Abraham himself.

In order to take the discussion further into this realm of 'inwardness', I then examined Michel Henry's notion of *radical subjectivity* through my own reading of an early work by Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*¹²⁵. The reading was documented as a personal diary or reflection on my reading and as such, was also a document of my own subjective experience of decision; I had already committed myself (for myself) to reading the text to the end but had still to carry out the activity. I could not predict what this would entail. The outcome was (and still remains) unquantifiable and the activity itself as a 'first time' in many respects is unrepeatable.¹²⁶

I am interested in philosophy as an embodied practice, and here, in the spirit of Kierkegaard, it seemed apt to try, in some way at least, to engage with ideas on an experiential as well as a theoretical or intellectual level. Including the DVD works as I have, as part of the thesis, means that in order to get from the beginning to end of the text, the reader is asked to physically move and do something other than reading. It is of course up to the reader whether they choose to do this in the order that I prescribed. However, this interruption of the reading and the different kind of receptiveness that sound and vision requires, hopefully offers another layer of interpretation and feeds back into the reading of the text. This was part of my intention in including the works in the way that I did. As well as this, I am interested in whether contemporary philosophical work can be carried out in a way that is not solely text-based, that is, which does not depend on the printed word. For this reason, I wanted to see whether it was possible to explore the research question through other forms of practice. Although these works are still very much text-based, they do allow

¹²⁵ Which is also, I believe, his doctoral thesis work.

¹²⁶ See Supplement 2 for more background information on this work.

a level of engagement with ideas that is not solely academic. Equally, making the work was in itself a research process, uncovering and displaying different levels of the research question and ways to address it. In particular I was interested in how the written text and these other instances of practice feed off and echo each other in ways that were not initially obvious.

The second part of the thesis was determined by another decision which I made ‘in faith’, so to speak. I had reached a point of ‘crisis’ through the Michel Henry project and in the research as a whole. When one of my supervisors suggested that I read *The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, I made the decision to use this as a primary source for the next stage of the research, despite the fact that I did not know anything about it. Although at the time I was aware that this decision was a form of ‘leap of faith’, and as such entirely in line with the project, it was not, at the time, an overtly conscious enactment of the research question. In retrospect, it became clear that it was precisely that. I made the decision to commit to this reading although I did not know what it would yield and despite the fact that I found scarce reference to it in any other texts.

Part Two of the thesis is a reading of that text. In this section, I look at the character of the actress in *Crisis*, who I call ‘H’, since the actual subject (Johanne Heiberg) is not directly named in the article. Although the article poses as a simple newspaper review of an actress plating the part of Juliet in Shakespeare’s play, it becomes evident through the discussion what exactly is at stake for Kierkegaard, both in writing and publishing this article. The article also allows the discussion of decision and locus of decision to be examined in different aspects.

Abraham’s decision was exceptional, just as he as an individual was exceptional. It is not even possible to say whether he existed or not. The actress ‘H’ did exist in reality, however, and as such seemed a more tangible model of subjectivity, to begin with at least.

In Part Two, I take what Kierkegaard calls the ‘metamorphosis’ of this actress and examine in what way she effects such a metamorphosis. What is of concern here is, once again, the concept of decision, this time examined through Kierkegaard’s categories of passion, repetition and anxiety. The movement that the actress performs in metamorphosis is, I suggest, a repetition in the sense that Kierkegaard uses the term. It is a more ‘intensive return to the beginning’ and as such is also a radical transformation.

What emerges in the examination of the actress is a subjective ‘locus’ of decision which, like Abraham, is not a single entity but rather like a congregation of satellites around a very precise but empty central point. An array of characters emerge through the actress: Juliet (who, in herself, is a set of elliptical subjects), the actress at 16 and at 30 years of age, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym author of *Crisis* ‘Inter et Inter’, Kierkegaard himself and ‘the single individual’. These characters overlap or intersect at one single point, which at the same time is a point of dislocation, where no character ‘belongs’ as such. Once more Agamben’s ‘exception’ emerges through the figure of the actress. Balibar’s notion of *persona* helps to envisage such a place through the idea of ‘the citizen subject’.

By extension, it is possible also to imagine at that point of intersection (and dislocation) Abraham, ‘the father of faith’; the character of Elena Carnell ; Johannes Climacus ‘the practicing doubter’ and beginning philosopher; myself as the ‘reader’ of Michel Henry and of *Crisis*; the audience in *Crisis*; the reader of Kierkegaard and so on into the multitudinous web of subjective relations, pseudonyms, readers, actors, spectators and so on that are presented in the thesis as a whole.

Such a nexus or ‘locus’ is at the same time the place of freedom, of ‘infinite possibility’. As such, it is also a source of anxiety. In the chapter on anxiety, I look at how the actress takes it upon herself to assume the responsibility of deciding to perform Juliet for a second time. Despite the odds being against her, she makes that decision in the only way possible, through anxiety. Her decision is made in order to effect the very transformation which will enable her to become an actress, as though for the first time.

Finally, I show how the ‘crisis’ of Kierkegaard’s title is also decision in the most radical sense; the actress in the article is like a cipher for Kierkegaard’s own anxiety and for his own personal crisis. The moment of crisis is also the point at which decision occurs (once again the various instances of crisis related in the thesis coincide in this one term: Abraham’s, Kierkegaard’s, that of the actress and Johannes and also my own)

What is of concern in the notion of crisis is the idea of a beginning, a re-birth or conversion. In any beginning, there is always decision. Decision means ‘to cut’ and as such institutes a schism. In that cut is the ‘nothing’, that ‘abyss’ of infinite possibility. At the point of decision, the subject, inhabits a territory which no concept can describe; it is that ‘being in two places at once’ which is the very condition of decision.

Through the discussion, then, emerges a model of decision as a point of crisis. Crisis as the condition of decision, it is that collision of elements from which there is no retreat but which requires instead a movement through and out of it, towards the unknown. What Kierkegaard calls 'faith' is decision at this most radical point; the point of no return. In crisis, subjectivity provides the passageway out, passion the catalyst, repetition the mode and anxiety the medium. All of these are components of decision, which coincide at the peak of their power in the moment of crisis. Together they effect an irrevocable transformation, a decision which is a 'new' beginning, re-charged and re-intensified with its own potential.

Decision then, in the terms set out here seems to be a very unusual occurrence, requiring a particular set of circumstances. However, for Kierkegaard, this is not necessarily the case. As he makes clear in *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, I can never tell which moment may be the decisive one. For this reason I must 'make it clear to myself whether I am beginning something worth beginning if death should come tomorrow...' ¹²⁷ For Kierkegaard, every moment must be thought of as having the potential for transformation. I cannot wait to be called by God or to be given a part in a performance. The moment has arrived.

¹²⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974. pp.166-67.

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Postscript on dialogue between ‘Anthony McElville’ and ‘Elena Carnell’

As I say in the Conclusion to the thesis, it will now be clear that the discussion between ‘Elena Carnell’ and ‘Anthony McElville’, is a scripted dialogue between two eminent, but fictitious philosophers played by actors. This dialogue (which I wrote and which as a work in itself I call ‘Onlookers’) is intended to be presented in a Philosophy conference setting where the audience are not aware of the fiction. I wanted the documentation to function in a similar way in the context of this thesis.

The reader may then have experienced an element of confusion or uncertainty as to what this dialogue was or why they were being asked to look at this DVD in the middle of the text. I would apologise for this discomfort if it were not for the fact that it was intended to some extent. I hope that the reader will now understand what the purpose of that interlude was and why I did not want to give a detailed introduction to that section of the thesis. This element of ‘trickery’ seemed initially to me to be crucial to the success of this work. Now I feel that this is less central and that even if the audience is aware of being involved in a set-up the dialogue still sustains itself and allows the audience to engage on different levels, suspending disbelief at times and at other times being reminded that they are watching a piece of drama unfolding.

The title ‘Onlookers’, that I give to the work is from a line in one of the (many) translations of Rilke’s *Eighth Duino Elegy*. In the poem, the word ‘onlookers’ is often also translated as ‘spectators’. This work needs to be reframed each time in order to suit the context in which it will be shown (for example, in this thesis).

The DVD documentation of the discussion between ‘Anthony McElville’ and ‘Elena Carnell’, included with the thesis, is from the first performance of this work. It was presented as part of a research symposium entitled ‘Interrupting, Connections: *Performative Interventions*’ at London College of Fashion November 2004. The event was organised by Hana Sakuma, Lawrence Sullivan and myself, all of whom presented work along with Andrew Chesher at the symposium. It was introduced and chaired by Professor Neil Cummings (all from Chelsea College of Art & Design, UAL).

'Onlookers' was also performed in January 2005 at Goldsmiths College as part of a series of events called 'Contemporary Thought' run by Professor Howard Caygill. Three artists presented work: Laura Cull, Lawrence Sullivan and myself and the event was billed as 'activating and interrogating some of the ideas raised by and relating to a *philosophy of the event*', which was the theme of that Contemporary Thought programme. Laura Cull organised and co-ordinated the event.

The actors who performed it both times were Linda Large as Elena and Alastair Danson as Anthony. I am very grateful to them for their commitment to the project and for their skill in understanding and portraying the characters. The dialogue, which I wrote, is entirely scripted and rehearsed and the actors learned the lines verbatim. I have included the script overleaf which is presented in the same form that the actors received it. There was some discussion in the rehearsals and some minor changes were made to the script between performances. This is the last version of the script that was used and may differ slightly from the one that is documented on the DVD.

The second performance was, to my mind, better. However, my efforts at having it documented were unsuccessful and I do not have footage of the entire performance. I have included some photographs from the Goldsmiths presentation which can be found after the script. I intend to re-stage and re-document it properly in the near future. The documentation itself can then have a life of its own as a work on film which will tour conferences or be shown in other contexts.

Script for 'The Onlookers'

The event is advertised on the programme as follows:

Where is the manager?

Anthony McElville (philosopher) and Vanessa Brooks (artist and writer)

One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world, it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules...How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager. To whom shall I make my complaint? (Soeren Kierkegaard: Repetition)

Two contemporary thinkers will discuss where "the manager" is in the world of art. (making, understanding and theorising.)

I introduce the session:

Good morning. The next session will stage a discussion between two contemporary thinkers. The dialogue is somewhat traditional in philosophy but in its live form somewhat unpredictable. We have experienced a bit of this unpredictability already today since we have just heard that one of the scheduled speakers Vanessa Brooks has had to pull out at the last minute. It's unfortunate and I know some of you will have been really looking forward to hearing her today. However, all is not lost. Elena Carnell, Professor in Philosophy of Science at University of Guelph, Ontario has generously volunteered to step in at the eleventh hour to take Vanessa's place.

Our other speaker is Anthony McElville, (*Anthony reacts slightly... looks around, uncomfortable*, Reader in Philosophy and Aesthetics at Vanderbilt University. His work traverses various disciplines including anthropology, politics and cultural history. His 1997 work, which most of you will know, "Crossing the Line: animal life from Spinoza to Deleuze" (from Suny series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy) brought him International acclaim. He currently working on a new publication "Creating the Human: art, brutality, modernism". (Published by Stanford University Press this year). Vanessa's absence may mean a change in the orientation of the discussion. We'll see. So without further ado I'll hand over to the speakers

Anthony: (*sounding a bit breathless and hesitant*) Thank you Isobel.

Elena, Good to meet you (*shaking her hand*) I can't tell you how relieved I am not to be having a conversation with myself in public! Thanks very much for stepping in.

Elena: (*friendly, calm and collected*) It's my pleasure.

Anthony: I must admit to suddenly becoming a bit nervous. Here we are thrown together by accident to engage in philosophical dialogue and.... I'm ashamed to admit, Elena, that I'm not *that* familiar with your work...

Elena: Well, of course this doesn't surprise me. You won't for instance have read my work since I haven't written any! Does a philosopher need to write? (*not confrontational*). Having said that I'm glad some do write, like you! Otherwise I wouldn't have had the privilege of knowing your work.

Anthony: Great! At least we can establish some common ground. But I hope we don't agree too much! That might not make for a very exciting discussion for our audience.

Elena: Oh, I'm sure we'll establish our differences before long.... (*turning to the audience and smiling then at Anthony*)

Anthony: Given the change in circumstances I'd just like to offer the audience and indeed you Elena, a brief overview of the area that Vanessa and I had planned to cover today. We had imagined this discussion would be a kind of live confrontation (*friendly of course*) between art and theory. The title of the session 'Where is the Manager' as you have no doubt seen is from Kierkegaard, a writer that has influenced both Vanessa and I a great deal. Kierkegaard thought that '*all decision, all essential decision, is rooted in subjectivity*'. This supposition was something that was starting point for me in my own work around the structure of decision and ...I'm concluding, for the moment, as far as one can conclude these things, that subjectivity has very little to do with decision. Vanessa's view is somewhat different and focuses more on decision as a kind of radically subjective move, much like Kierkegaard's definition of faith. So briefly, what Vanessa and I had planned to do was to see if we could find not a bridge exactly, as we philosophers like to complicate things, but perhaps an interstice, a narrow chink in our positions where we could come together. The notion of 'sovereign decision' seemed to provide such an opportunity. Sovereignty, according to Giorgio Agamben, the Italian philosopher, is not a modern idea. It is the essence of the political. Sovereign decision creates a state of exception, "*a threshold state of the non-identical, the liminal.*", as Andrew Norris says. Where does the artist stand in relation to such a threshold? Does the artist create a space of exception within an already established order, which theory then has to accommodate as exception, or...does a space of exception emerge *out of* the rules, as a kind of loophole in the system, which the artist appropriates? Who is *the sovereign*, or in Kierkegaard's words 'the manager', in the production of the artist? I suppose at its most simple this is a nature/ nurture question. Elena is this something you would like to comment on?

Elena: Indeed "*...the sovereign decision or the state of exception opens the space in which it is possible to trace borders between inside and outside and in which determinate rules can be assigned to determinate territories. In exactly the same way, only language as the pure potentiality to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the*

linguistic and allows for the opening of areas of meaningful speech in which certain terms correspond to certain denotations. Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself....¹

Anthony: Precisely. The question of language inevitably arises. How does the artist, or indeed any of us negotiate the determinations of language? How do we create something from the paradoxes that language leads us into when we try to defy it?

Elena: If we look at what Derrida says about decision: “*the structure of decision can never become object of theoretical or speculative certainty – if it could it wouldn’t be a decision.*” or “*one should not be sure that a decision has been made, even less that it has been a good one*”, we could begin to suspect that decision is not something that is *made* at all, at least not by us, whoever we are. Perhaps the sovereign (or the manager) is the law; something created by us but which has gained its own character, beyond our comprehension and control...

Anthony: Given that you and I come from backgrounds in philosophy and science and not art, it’s right to extend the scope of this discussion. I believe that contemporary artists are more than a little open to fields of enquiry outside of art. One only has to see the predominance of Deleuze on art theory programmes! In this light I wanted to say that as Isobel was introducing us, I was reminded about some fascinating research that I believe you were involved with in the 1980’s?...research on the relationship between nature and culture, the constitution of the ‘human’ and so on...in fact themes that would be extremely useful to bring in here. I wonder if you would want to bring some of that expertise into the discussion? (*gesturing with his hands in the way that academics do*)

Elena: (*takes a breath*) Aah....I wasn’t thinking about that...(*looks like she’s thinking*)... well, its true I was involved in some ground-breaking research ...however you’re right it would be most relevant... I don’t know how much I can say from the scientific point of view.... I wasn’t actually the author, if you remember...

Anthony: (*Doesn’t say anything, clears his throat, looks embarrassed, forces a laugh?*) Really! No? ...(pause)

Elena: Well, why not talk about it! I don’t tend to in public but this is an unusual situation and an opportunity to break the rules, wont it? No, I wasn’t the author of this groundbreaking research. / myself was the research *subject*. Like a specimen! Can you imagine!

Anthony: In what way?

Elena: (*a bit coy*) The ‘wolf girl of Tuva’ ... ha ha...so great was the interest in my case that I became quite a celebrity.... in the science community at least! So that is what you must be thinking of. (*laughs*)

Anthony: I’m not sure...maybe I’m thinking of some other research....But Elena, I do remember the case of the wolf girl very well...I just cant believe....well....I assume they’ve stopped doing those now, the case studies! (*a bit alarmed trying to be jokey*)

Elena: I agree it would have been good to see documentation of what a civilized person I had become! But, yes, they stopped them. Maybe they felt that once I had mastered language I could no longer be a “good subject” (*does the inverted commas sign*). You see.....em.... better

¹ Agamben – Homo Sacer p21

not go into that now.... (silence for a few seconds)...hmm...they lost interest I suppose, that's the short answer.

Anthony: (pause) Mastering language means you were no longer a 'subject', no longer 'subjected' so to speak... is that what you are saying?

Elena: Well yes. It seemed to me for a long time during what was called my "socialisation process" (*does the inverted comma sign again*) that I was made to learn 'tricks'. I know they were trying to help me, they did help me, but I was a bit like one of those dogs who learn to dance for Crufts, you know? It all felt quite unnatural to me. But once I had acquired language, I didn't feel as though I was doing tricks anymore. I was just living, being myself.

Anthony: But, if this is the case had you not then already in fact already *been mastered* in order to become yourself?

Elena: I was no longer a "good subject" (*does the inverted commas sign again*) but I was still a subject of course, as we all are. There are many ways of being subject.

Anthony: Of course.

Elena: Well, you only have to look at the etymology! The Latin *subjectus* comes from *subicere* "to place under", a combination of *sub* meaning "under" and *jacere* "to throw.". From Aristotle we have *to hypokeimenon*, literally 'that which lies beneath' but also 'material from which things are made'. The verb is first seen in late Medieval period from the Latin *subjectare* whilst *subjective*, "existing in the mind" dates from 1707.

Anthony: Yes, yes... ! (*as if remembering something*)your answer makes me want to ask.. how can I put this ... do you think that education, knowledge, academic achievement has made you or indeed makes any of less of a "good" (*does the inverted commas sign*) subject ?

Elena: I think it was Flannery O'Connor who said that "*Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days*"

Anthony: But do you think that education beyond that of your own life has helped you in any way to understand your extraordinary situation?

Elena: (*she gestures to the whole room*). Perhaps I can see myself more clearly through *your* eyes. Is that self-knowledge?I'm not sure.... Perhaps I am able to determine my own destiny to a greater extent.

Anthony: Ah yes? In what way?

Elena: (*her tone changes slightly to that of a news reporter*). In 1970, the discovery of Genie, a 13yr old 'wild child', aroused intense curiosity amongst academics in all fields. The girl, suffering extreme neglect and social deprivation had been locked in dark room for over ten years, tied to a potty chair and restrained by a harness. Once brought to the attention of social services, a 'Genie team' was established to take care of her and to study her behaviour. One psychologist said. "It's a terribly important case. Since our morality doesn't allow us to conduct deprivation experiments with human beings, these unfortunate people are all we have to go on." Everyone who came into contact with Genie was captivated by her. She was described as "fragile", "beautiful", "almost haunting" even "eerily silent". Under the supervision of the Genie team, she made good progress except in her speech. She failed to learn the kind of grammatical principles that, according to Noam Chomsky, distinguish the language of human beings from that of animals. In 1978 Genie's mother became her legal Guardian and

immediately set about suing (amongst others) carers and the Children's Hospital for exploiting Genie for personal gain. Now Genie is in a high security psychiatric unit, sedated with drugs....*Pause*....Given other circumstances it might have been Genie sitting here with you today.

Anthony: Tragic case, but well....I'm not quite sure.... I mean are you suggesting that it was Genie's circumstances or her learning capabilities (or both) that determined her fate?

Elena: (*excitedly, naturally*) The law decided her fate. She is Homo Sacer ! Homo Sacer, the outcast, the one who is both sacred and damned, the one who has a peculiar kind of liberty; the kind that only the dispossessed can appreciate.

Anthony: Ah... perhaps it would be good to clarify that Homo Sacer is derived from ancient Roman law. He or she is a human being who by virtue of their crime, were rendered impure and thus sacred (since sacredness was either pure or impure, Roman Law is obscure on this). Although they were sacred they could not be sacrificed in ritual offering but anyone who wished one could kill without incurring the penalty of murder. *The life of homo sacer is situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law.* The emperor decided who became Homo Sacer. Agamben has written a book of the same name.

Elena: But there is a problem with Agamben. He thinks he needs to refuse to give his fingerprints and to be banned from entering the USA. He doesn't understand that he is already banned.

Anthony: I think what he is saying is that he has a choice. Some of us do. Perhaps Genie had no choice?

Elena: You think that you have a secure place within the fold it the first place?

Anthony: Can you explain what you mean by the fold?

Elena: (*maybe slightly hesitant slightly less confident*) Hmm (*silence pause while she thinks. She then looks at Anthony again expectantly.. then with a slightly French accent*) " I have an arm amputated, all right. I say: myself and my arm. If both of them are gone, I say: myself and my two arms. If it were my legs it would be the same thing...but if they cut off my head, what could I say then? Myself and my body, or myself and my head? By what right does the head , which isn't even a member like an arm or a leg, claim the title of 'myself'?" Trelkovsky, from Polanski's film *The Tenant*. (she announces this like a reference)

Anthony: (*a bit agitated as though reminded of an irritating/frightening incident*) I couldn't sleep after seeing that film! It reminded me of a time when....someone decided that the music that was keeping me awake at night, was in fact being played by me. I was reported to the landlord and received a letter threatening eviction. After that I worried if I scraped a knife too loudly on a plate.... (*begins drifting off slightly, pause*) but... where were we?

Elena: (*slightly patronising as though humouring him*) How interesting.... But I'm sorry I distracted you from your train of thought. Where were we?

Anthony: The fold.

Elena: Well....the question of *belonging* interests me greatly. Does belonging mean to be absorbed into something? Does it mean to camouflage oneself? When a decision is made something changes, yes? Something is transformed perhaps? If it is transformed does it still

belong to the category that it was before? Let me put it this way. I am a nurse who decides to become a plumber. When I am a plumber am I no longer a nurse? At what point do I become a plumber and no longer a nurse? Is it possible that in transformation nothing is retained of the original or is the original always still there? Is transformation where two seemingly disparate forms overlap and when they appear together in that intersection...they... well they appear to make something altogether new. It is like community, *one group* of many intersecting individuals. Do you follow me?

Anthony: (*getting a bit excited even agitated now*) You remind me of Whitehead, but I suspect that you're actually adopting a quasi-Deleuzian stance, would you agree?

Elena: Deleuzian.... I think it's broader than that and perhaps simpler.

Anthony: I'm not sure that it's simpler, but could we put it another way? If we believe ourselves to be part of a community that we call human, maybe this is the fold you refer to, there is *something* which binds us as a species as it were. This something is humanity itself, yes? When someone is excluded from this community is it their *humanity* as such is in question? We might believe that for example, the murderer's actions compromise his or her humanity, but are they still regarded first and foremost as a human being. Can one be robbed or relinquished of humanity through the actions of either oneself or the other?

Elena: Your take on this question is that of moral philosophy. But what constitutes humanity could be as the evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar puts it a "social braining process" (*does the inverted comma sign*). The neo-cortex, which is an evolutionary advancement found in primates and which in humans constitutes 80% of the brain gives us the ability to maintain complex social relations. The neo-cortex also produces imagination and story-telling abilities. Is it the ability to tell stories and also perhaps believe in them by virtue of the imagination that constitutes humanity?

Anthony: It seems that what we are asking in a round about way is this: Are we creatures which *undergo* creation as human beings or do we create ourselves? How do we all create ourselves as belonging to the same group and at the same time conflicting or contrasting groups? Is this what we are asking?

Elena: Is being human a creative decision? (*as though surprised at herself*)
(*Silence for a few moments. Both look thoughtful and maybe hesitant*)

Anthony: You know Elena (*..pause....sigh*). As we're talking...going back to what you said at the beginning, I'm acutely aware that your life has in many ways been the very living of this question. You, in a sense, have been excluded *from the beginning*. Maybe it's only striking me now that in fact you didn't enter the human community until the age of ...?

Elena: (*tense*) Ten.

Anthony: So...how can I put this .. what stories did you tell yourself before the age of ten? I mean until that point you were never with other human beings?

Elena: I must say that it is strange to hear you suggesting that I may be an ambiguous example of humanity. I'm almost relieved that you have said it. Most people won't hear of it.

Anthony: (*kindly*) But if I admit ambiguity in you, then I must also admit ambiguity in myself.

Elena: Exactly. But for myself there is no ambiguity. *I have never regarded myself as a human being, even though I know that physically I am supposed to be one.* Of course, I cannot say for certain if I am right, objectively speaking.

Anthony: Are we not all in this position? If I have any kind of conscience, I ask myself 'How much do I care? How much do I love 'and so on. Am I not then questioning the level of my humanity? Isn't humanity always ambiguous? It's not so much with whether or not we are human but *how* human we are?

Elena: You are assuming, quite rightly I'm sure, that there is humanity in you *in the first instance.* For myself I cannot say whether it is a question of levels or a question of what I am starting out with.

Anthony: If you put it like that, there is no doubt in my mind for me it is a question of degree. I must admit to finding what you say quite unfathomable. I can't conceive of you as anything other than human. Indeed if you don't mind me saying you seem more human, more humane than I!

Elena: (slightly coy) I know that is a compliment, thank you! (*changes tone*). Michael Lyvers in his article *Who Has Subjectivity?* suggests that and I quote "*in everyday life, most people generally assume that if it looks like a (phenomenally) conscious duck, walks like a conscious duck, and quacks like a conscious duck, then it probably is a conscious duck. A few of us might occasionally contemplate the counter-intuitive hypothesis that it could be an imposter, that only acts as if conscious, but most of us ...have no reason to think this is the case for ducks, much less for non-human mammals*". However, from a scientific perspective at least, subjectivity is not needed to explain behaviour in humans or non-human animals.

Anthony: Yes indeed, but thinkers from non-scientific traditions like Bakhtin have seen that a sense of one's own subjectivity contributes to an awareness of the other. "*If I feel such and such then they must feel such and such*".

Elena: Empathy! Empathy is not only to do with the mind and emotions but is a visceral, innate tendency to identify with other beings. For example when a monkey observes other monkeys performing certain actions, the same parts of his frontal cortex are activated as when he himself performs those actions.

Anthony: But surely science reaches as many aporias as philosophy?

Elena: One can suspect that scientists know what reality is, because they have seen it, measured it and have named its components. But we have 'creative' mathematicians like Gregory Godel who have found randomness at the basis of mathematics.....Unthinkable!or physicists like Gregory Mulhauser who are now saying that quantum mechanics can tell us nothing about consciousness '*interactive decoherence*' *promise to remove the conscious observer from the phenomenon of state vector reduction* " he says! Now after all these years of saying that the self cannot be found, one scientist, whose name I can't recall right now, is saying that, perhaps there is some thing, *a thing*, a phenomenal substance that can be called the self after all....If scientists prove one thing beyond doubt, they will need the philosophers again. Even they cannot live with such simplicity. Philosophy will protect them from that.

Anthony: Are all scientists called Gregory? But seriously...can philosophy protect us from anything? Socrates said that philosophy is a preparation for death. The only thing of which we

can truly be certain is that one day, at a time we ourselves cannot predict, we will cease to exist. This is the unbearable simplicity. In the death of others' we see that whatever we call life can abandon us suddenly, without notice. It is the ceasing to exist of others that teaches us what it means to be human.

Elena: What about animals then? What does death teach them?

Anthony: I'm not sure. I did see a programme about elephants where the herd came across an elephant corpse. The whole herd fell silent. They scanned the corpse with their trunks as if trying to identify it. Some of them took the bones in their trunks and fondled them. It was as though they were recognising something about death, perhaps even mourning.

Elena: For some reason Spinoza comes to mind here, or perhaps I should say Deleuze comes to mind and through him Spinoza: "*one Nature for all bodies, one Nature for all individuals, a nature that is itself an individual varying in an infinite number of ways. What is involved is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a common plane of immanence on which all bodies, all minds and all individuals are situated*"

Anthony: (*excitedly*) Yes but what can we understand anything about that realm of immanence, especially of what we might all share in that common plane? Do you remember the amazing experiment that Heidegger talks about? A photograph is taken of retinal image that is produced in a glow worm's vision as it looks in the direction of a window. The photograph shows very clearly a view of the window, a large letter 'R' which has been fixed to the window as well as a blurred view of the church tower which can be seen through the window. The image proves that an insect is capable of forming this view, but can we tell from this what it really sees? Heidegger says we cannot. It is a question of *how* it sees not only what it sees. The human being has a capacity to see that has a different potential to that of the glow-worm. The fact that we can form the same view technically tells us nothing about this difference.

SILENCE for a few moments

Elena: I have few memories of the time before my capture. When I say *memories* I mean things I can put into words. Sometimes a smell or a sound will strike me with a certain force and cause me to cry out or feel some kind of pain. I believe that this must be a memory of sorts.

Anthony: (*quietly*) Aristotle says "Many animals have memory, and are capable of instruction; but no other creature except man can recall the past at will"

Silence again

Elena: We had been aware that humans had been following us for a while. Normally we would be so much faster than them, but there were the cubs, which slowed us down. One day these humans got close. I felt more agitation than usual amongst them. We all felt it but had to lie low rather than run. We were exhausted and so were the cubs. All of a sudden there was a loud bang. I heard yelping. I thought the others had run off but I found out later they had been killed. I don't know why I didn't run but I just stood rigid and watched as the smoke from the guns

evaporating slowly around me. The forest had never seemed so silent. Once the smoke lifted, I saw them standing around me. Only a few feet away our leader, was lying dead on the ground. One of them kicked her and made her body roll over, out of the way. Her coat was sodden with blood. I slumped down on top of her and started to lick her wounds. Her body was still warm and floppy, but I no longer felt the familiar moist breathe on my face, the rough tongue smoothing my hair or the warm nuzzle pushing into me. I just lay there like that. I don't know what happened then. I don't remember much of the following year or so. Anya told me that in the early days *she couldn't touch me, without me fighting her. I would fight, scream, kick, bite and twist. I'd often pull my own arms out of their sockets. If she locked me in a room, I would tear the room apart and bite myself. I punched walls, doors and windows through. I always had cracked knuckles, sprained wrists and cuts. I couldn't stand being in a house at times.*² There are probably things she didn't tell me. I liked to go outside and lie in the mud. My modesty was not what it should have been in a young girl. You know...

I didn't know why they had killed my family and taken me to this place. I kept trying to get back to the forest but never succeeded. As the years past I began to have newfound needs. There was a time I could run for days over icy plains, sleeping in dug out holes. I could go for days without eating. That's what we did. When we did eat it might only have been a rabbit or some tick ridden old elk that had already been half devoured. But I began to feel cold at night. I was eating at least once a day, sometimes more. I could no longer bear raw meat. I began to seek out things that I never thought about before- tastes, sensations, and sounds. The first time I put shoes on was like torture. Then I learned the usefulness of clothes. Then I always wanted for something... Its strange telling you this you know. I've never spoken about it. In fact I don't even know that I've thought about it before like this...as if I'm describing it for the first time....

Anthony: (*tentatively*) Are you saying that it would have been better if you had never been found?

Elena: Being discovered was in a sense a tragedy.

Anthony: Why?

Elena: I remember the look in their eyes as they saw that I was a human child. At the same time, on seeing them, a glimmer of recognition passed through me. Only a glimmer but it left me trembling. It was as though in that moment we were nothing but living matter blown apart into a chaotic mass of breath, fear, hope, energy, love, pain, skin, teeth, blood, sound. In that momentit was as though the rift that we thought was between us closed over... at the same time another rift, deeper, older, more familiar somehow opened up within each of us. What was closed to us? What was open now? Something was lost when it came to light there in that clearing in the forest.

SILENCE

² from Kitty's testimony

Anthony: *Look at the birds, at their half-certainty, who seem to fly with one wing in each world as if they were the souls escaping from Etruscan dead*

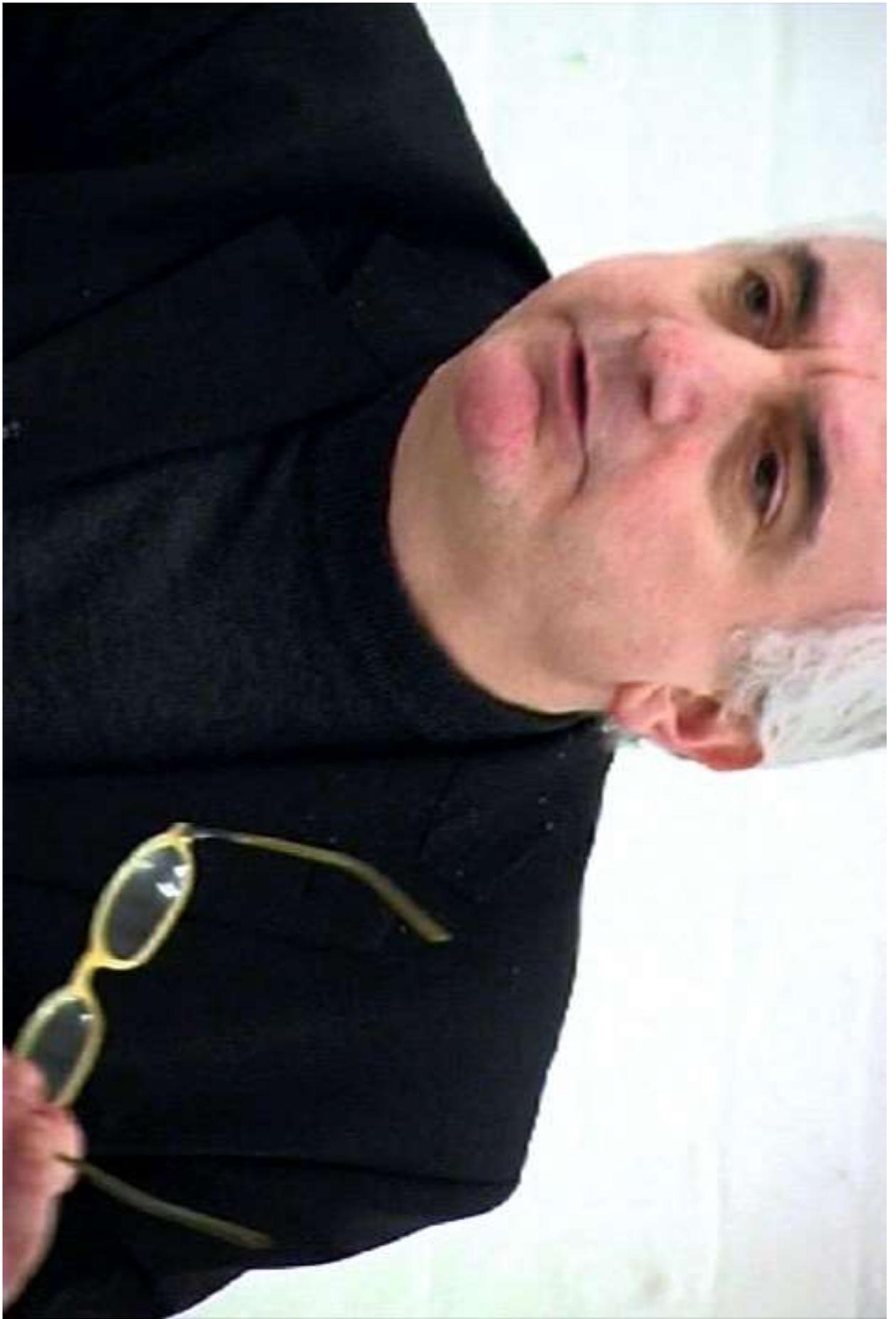
Elena: *from one who shares a box with his own effigy, at liberty, reposing on the lid.*

Anthony: *And how perplexed must any womb-born creature feel, who is obliged to fly thin air. As if in panic fear they flitter through that sky, afraid of flight itself*

Elena: *swift as a flaw runs through a cup, the lightning passage of a bat makes hair-cracks in the porcelain of dusk.*³

Elena and Anthony stand up, shake hands and leave.

³ Rilke – eighth elegy.









Short postscript to video diary 'Reading Michel Henry'

From quite early on in the project, I decided that I was going to donate my copy of *The Essence of Manifestation* to a library and for that reason made no notes in it as I usually do (in pencil!). Instead, I kept a written notebook and diary alongside the video documentation.

In the light of the research I was doing on Kierkegaard at the time of making this work, it seems retrospectively that there is a coherence and link with the project that I did not initially foresee. What strikes me most clearly now is that no repetition is possible of this experience of making the work and of producing the video documentation. This is not only because it was my first ever reading of *The Essence of Manifestation* but for several other reasons. The most obvious but at the same time surprising and totally unforeseeable were the circumstances that coincided in those months of reading the book such as the July 7th bombings in London and the shooting of Jean-Charles de Menezes. Less significantly, the impractical decision to decorate my back room at the same time as carrying out the project and this coinciding with the (enjoyable but distracting) visit from my Australian cousin provided even more interruptions than usual. Alongside these external events some of which were outside of my control, I had made some decisions of my own which affected the proceedings in a way that I did not initially consider. I decided that I would always report in to the camera on the same day as the reading took place. At least this was the case after a few 'false starts' and some procrastination. I also started the reading before I had fully worked out how to use the video camera (I had not used a video camera for a long time and this small machine was entirely new to me). It is for that reason that there are some 'unconventional' effects in the video and not for any (anti-) aesthetic reason. The process of becoming more practised in video technology happened alongside the reading. Once I had finished the reading and the filming, I then had to teach myself video editing. I had only done analogue editing before and so this was another 'first time' in this project. It was important for me to include something from every day of filming, whether the documentation was 'suitable' or not. Therefore each date in the diary only includes material that I have recorded on that actual day. If days are omitted in the film it is because I was away or had other commitments which took me away from the project altogether.

Naturally, there are many things that I could have changed in the editing process to alter the aesthetic of the video, but in order to have fidelity to what I was doing, it quite simply had to be as it was - something completely unrehearsed and un-staged. I could have been tempted to re-shoot parts to make it (and myself!) appear more interesting, appealing, better groomed or prepared and so on, but if I had done so then it would have been an entirely different project. The one 'aesthetic' choice I did make quite clearly was between the visual element and the sound. In effect, I had to decide between the two. I could not have coherency of both if I was going to be faithful to the idea and to the project I had set for myself. I also had to consider that decisions, cuts, had to be made. I could not subject an audience to endless hours of my unedited ramblings. Therefore, I decided to sacrifice the continuity of the visuals in order to gain a more seamless or continuous soundtrack. This decision was made quite deliberately as I wanted to emphasise the disjuncture between the finished product in research or writing and the number of decisions, changes and false starts that lead to that final product, something that needs to be more or less polished in order to communicate to others. In sacrificing visual coherency and leaving in the awkward jumps or visual glitches, I was in fact able to show something of the frequency of cuts and the effort involved in trying to produce a more seamless narrative.

Report on reading of 'What is radical subjectivity', February 2004

The first performed work that I did in this project was in February 2004. I had to give a presentation on my research and decided that I wanted to experiment with presentation.

I had been thinking for some time that my research was leading towards thinking about performance as a form of presenting the ideas. So I decided to use the opportunity provided by the next Chelsea Symposium as an opportunity to try something out. Whenever I considered 'performing' myself it felt too contrived or inappropriate. Then I had the idea of asking someone to read my paper in my place. Almost at the same time I realised I wanted to ask Vasiliki Boutopoulous, a friend of mine, to help me. She has qualities that I thought would be perfect. She has the correct balance of qualities that I was looking for. I was delighted when she said yes.

When I first put the idea to Vasiliki, I suggested that I would be present while she presented the paper, that I would introduce her quite minimally without explanation of why she was there and that she wouldn't rehearse the paper but would see it for the first time on the day. I also suggested that she feel free to comment on the paper as she read it. At that time I was quite interested in the process of reading something for the first time and for that process to become visible.(or audible). However, as the written text developed, I realised that I was tailoring it for this specific situation and that it was necessary for Vasiliki to at least familiarise herself with the content before reading it. She too felt happier about seeing it first, otherwise she would have felt too apprehensive. Vasiliki also said that she did not want to add any comments to my text, that it was my work and she wanted to simply present it.

On the day presentation I simply introduced Vasiliki saying, 'Hello I'd like to introduce Vasiliki Boutopolous who will be presenting the paper on my behalf.'. She was in the speaker's seat and I sat down immediately next to her. Vasiliki proceeded to read the text in a very beautiful delivery. I had a copy of the text in front of me but didn't actually look at it. I was transfixed on what Vasiliki was saying, trying to hear if it made sense or if it sounded as I had intended. The experience for me was quite intense. I felt completely alive and attentive and somehow strangely exposed. Before the event I had mentioned to Vasiliki that we didn't need to be nervous because it was as though the work belonged to neither of

us, as though it were in-between. As it happened, I had a strong proprietorial feeling on several occasions during the presentation along with a feeling of loss of control and exclusion. The experience was quite visceral and I had the sensation like a live current flowing through my body during the whole reading. I sensed sometimes that the content of the paper became absolutely alive in this situation, at times drawing attention to my presence in a comfortable way at other times as though I was this 'unknown something' hovering in the background, present but not visible. Certain passages in particular seemed exemplary in bringing together form and content, for example those from Henry and Kierkegaard, where it was as though I became like that 'silent witness', the unseen creator, the void, the abyss and all of those characteristics of the 'ineffable' of which one can neither talk of presence or absence. At times it was as though the space of 'subjectivity' became wide open and free floating. There was quite a palpable sense of not knowing where the 'I' that the text referred to was situated. (or rather that Vasiliki referred to when she spoke the text)

When Vasiliki finished people applauded. Strangely, it was only at that point that it was obvious to me that what had just happened was a 'performance'. We began a discussion and for a few minutes Vasiliki and I were in conversation about the experience. Neil Cummings (my director of studies) said that at this point it was as though I was talking to myself, as though Vasiliki and I were two parts of the same person. Vasiliki said that when she started she thought that she could be invisible but soon realised that wasn't possible. She said also that she was very aware of me sitting next to her and all of my body movements.

The responses of the audience were interesting. Neil had a copy of the paper and was in a privileged position as it happened that the text was too dense to follow in places. He suggested handing out copies to everyone next time. This was something that perhaps made one person say that they weren't sure whether to concentrate on the content or the form/performance. In fact, what happened was that these two aspects became inseparable. It was, as Neil suggested, as though the people think that a 'normal' presentation allows you to 'get' the content more easily. However, perhaps if people had a copy of the paper during the presentation., it may have been easier not to enter into that confusion.

Reactions from the audience suggested that to some extent the 'zone' of decision moved from the presentation to the audience. Some people in the audience were confused. Someone thought I couldn't speak but remembered they had heard me speak before, or maybe I didn't like my accent, or that I was shy! Eventually, they decided just to listen.

I was pleased with the outcome as it suggested potential for new work and I began to see what my practice might become. Previously the ‘practice’ element was quite vague for me. This presentation suggested that the form has to be completely in tune with the content and that I have to remain very sensitive to that balance. It was also very simple or subtle decisions that made all the difference– i.e. substituting myself for Vasiliki, sitting next to her rather than somewhere else in the room (I hadn’t thought of that before the even but did it spontaneously), introducing her in such a way that I didn’t give too much away, tuning into the performance as it unfolded so that I behaved appropriately (something I hadn’t anticipated or even really thought about beforehand either).

It seemed that in order for this presentation to work I had to be in a particular ‘state’. I needed to be completely and genuinely attentive and it had to really matter to me whether it worked or not. Something had to be a stake for me. What that was I didn’t quite know at the time.

This presentation and first trial run of practice suggested exciting future possibilities and I decided to continue in trying to create contexts rather than waiting for them to present themselves. I also intend to start playing about with forms of presentation more.

I have included the text that Vasiliki read in the following pages. It has not been prepared for publication so there is no real referencing. It is simply a ‘performance’ text.

What is radical subjectivity: paper for presentation Feb 2004

The working title for my research is 'What does it mean to make a decision?' This paper will be looking specifically at whether we can say that subjectivity can be said to constitute a locus of decision. So I'll begin....

I remember being in the seaside resort of Morecambe. I think I was with my childhood friend who I have lost touch with now. We were standing, on the pavement of a very wide stretch of road which runs along the promenade and we were facing the sea. It was one of those warm breezy days with a slight mist coming in from the water. We were amongst a crowd of people who were gathered around a man with a table. The man asked four of us to come forward. For some reason, shy as I was, I found myself standing round the table with three others. The man asked one of us for an object which he could use to tap on the table. Someone gave him a set of keys. He asked us all to place our hands on the top of the table. Then he banged the table loudly with the keys saying 'Rise, table. rise'. At first nothing happened, but then as he said 'Rise, table, Rise' even louder and the table trembled a couple of times and then stopped. We thought nothing was going to happen when it suddenly swooped upwards and took off across the road towards the sea. The man said to us "Hold on, keep your hands on the table!" We tried to keep our hands on the top, but it was too fast for us and we couldn't keep up and had to let it go. More people were gathering in a line across the road and the man shouted "Stand back!" When the table got to the other side of the road it hovered for a bit and then came veering back towards us swaying from side to side. As it reached us it slowed down and gently settled back on to the ground.

For a long time I forgot about this story and began to think I had imagined it. Then on TV a year or so ago I saw a programme about magic and they did a slot on a well-known magician who used to perform amazing feats in places like Morecambe. I was so excited to see to see evidence that I hadn't imagined the whole thing that I wrote down the magician's name. However since then I've lost the piece of paper I wrote it on and can't remember the programme or who I watched it with.

Part 1

Along with some other people in this audience, I recently attended a conference, called 'Theory as an Object'.

At this conference Peter Hallward gave a talk on texts by Gilles Deleuze, Alan Badiou and Michel Henry, none of which I had read at this time.

Recent French philosophy, said Hallward, proposes that what 'we are' cannot be represented. How do we know where we are now, theoretically speaking, if we do not know where we came from, theoretically speaking. The 'we' in this case referred to that audience, attending a talk on art theory and therefore with a vested interest in what was, as Hallward suggested, at stake both in contemporary philosophy as well cultural and literary theory: *representation*.

In the discussion afterwards someone in the audience criticised the content of Hallward's talk which she called: '*Hideous Idealism*'. I'm not really sure what she meant but nevertheless it stayed with me. I felt somehow that it was aimed at me since I had been so interested in what Hallward had to say.

For some reason, it seemed to me that what was suggested by this term '*hideous idealism*', was something to do with the notion of radical subjectivity. Until recently I hadn't thought so much about this term but I remembered hearing the words '*radical subjectivity*' used in a similarly critical way at another conference. The target this time was the work of the Danish philosopher Soeren Kierkegaard, whose work I have been very interested in as part of my research on decision. I have noticed this term *radical subjectivity* used quite a few times in relation to him, but not always critically.

So I began looking at the work of Michel Henry to see if that threw any light on the subject. You would really have to read him to follow his arguments which are both compelling and very beautifully drawn out and which I don't really understand as yet but I will try to sketch out a few things as I understand them so far.

The cover notes of Henry's book *I am the Truth*, tell us that Henry proposes, through what he calls the "auto-affection of Life"; access to a "radical subjectivity that admits no outside, to the immanence of affective life found beyond the despair fatally attached to all objectifying thought... [where].. all problems of lack, ambivalence, and false projections are resolved"

What is meant by 'radical subjectivity' when applied to Kierkegaard and Henry and could such a notion be considered to be idealist? Could the notion of radical subjectivity appear to be placing something in a privileged position; immune to discourse, theory, opinion or criticism, perhaps even to thought itself.

Idealism, particularly subjective idealism, denies any knowable external reality beyond our own minds. Perhaps it is the solipsism implied in such an idea that would be considered such a hideous idea! If subjectivity is grounded in an experience of self which is both untransmittable, and/ or unknowable then how can any 'other' or outside ever really count?

I am the Truth, by Michel Henry is a philosophy of Christianity. It does not attempt to ask whether Christianity is true or not but looks at what Christianity can tell us about truth and reality. In this work Henry refers to Ipseity many times. “*the original essence of Ipseity*”, he says, is the identity “*between experiencing and what is experienced*”

I found the term Ipseity described elsewhere , by John Taylor, a mathematician interested in consciousness. Ipseity, he says:

...is not supposed to arise by some subtle process of self-reflection: it is non-relational, and cannot correspond to any introspective process. But then how can it relate in any manner at all to external input? In so doing it would be polluted by content. How can it help create the ‘qualia’ of experience if it itself has no content?
(just a note here to say that qualia refers to the felt or phenomenal qualities associated with experiences, such as the feeling of pain, seeing of colour etc).

Taylor continues:

This quandary has led to many proposed solutions: do away with ipseity altogether, do away with consciousness as we experience it and make it a ‘centre of narrative gravity’ , make ipseity have mysterious powers (non-material, for example), and so on...

For Henry the Classical (i.e. Greek) conception of man is that he is more than a living. Man is endowed with Logos (reason and language) and Life is less than man. The Christian view says that Life is more than man, more than Logos. Life is more than a living (and this applies to God also). Henry makes the distinction between *life* and *the world*; whereas the world is a place where things are shown, life does not appear in the world.

Life, according to Henry:

... is a self-movement that is self- experiencing and never ceases to be self-experiencing in its very movement- in such a way that from this self-experiencing movement nothing is ever detached; nothing slips away from it, away from this self-moving self experience...

The world is the place where things (phenomenon) show themselves as empty, life is where manifestation manifests itself.

In the recent exhibition of Hiroshi Sugimoto’s work at the Serpentine Gallery there were a series of photographs depicting the horizon between the sea and sky in a variety of locations around the world. On one wall were images which appeared to be uniformly dark, verging on being completely black but not quite. We were told by the plaque on the wall that in this dark image there was a line which divided sea and sky. This line was hard to discern not only because the transition from sea to sky wasn’t obvious, in the way that for example, it is difficult to know where the outward breath ends and the inward begins, but because there seemed to be no difference at all between sea and sky. Since we had been told that there was a horizon we looked more closely. On some images it was possible to glimpse tiny markings which looked like waves on the sea, but the effort to see them made one dizzy, especially since the gallery was lit by electric light as well as the glare from the crisp winter afternoon sun. On the whole I believed that there was a horizon to be found but gave up trying to find it.

Part 2

Henry is a phenomenologist but one who differs quite fundamentally from Heidegger. Henry starts by saying that Christianity is talked about as being a flight from reality and from the world. However, the world for Henry is not reality. It is on this point that he most emphatically disagrees with Heidegger. I found it helpful to look at Heidegger again in order to see what Henry was talking about. Although I'm still not really clear it might help here.

For Heidegger, Descartes' famous conclusion *cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am" investigates the *cogito* but not the *sum*. Heidegger's project is to take up the *sum*: Why is it certain that if *I think* I must also exist? If *I am* because *I think* then what is the relation of thinking to being? Is it possible that my thinking can tell me something about what causes me to think? Why is it that there is something to think and not nothing?

In works such as *What is Called Thinking?* Heidegger sees the human subject as occupying a unique position in terms of an enquiry into the nature of thought. The question, *What is Called Thinking?*, calls upon us, upon our very being; "*We ourselves are the text and the texture of the question*" says Heidegger. The fact that we are able to ask the question at all means that we already have an understanding of what it is that calls us to think.

When we name a thing, says Heidegger, it is like bringing two things together, the name and thing named. Although, for Heidegger the name and thing do not necessarily indicate a sameness, to name something means there is some relation to the original meaning. "*A name*" he says "*is not just draped over the thing.*" Heidegger says:

We are able to grasp beings as such, as beings, only if we understand something like being. If we did not understand, even though at first roughly and without conceptual comprehension, what actuality signifies, then the actual would remain hidden from us...

The kind of thinking that is characteristic in our Age of Technology, is what Heidegger calls *representational* or *calculative*. This kind of thinking tries to regulate and transform the world for our own ends. Heidegger proposes a more authentic mode of thinking which he calls *meditative* or *contemplative* thinking, the task of which is to be open to what is given to thought.

The thinking that we do nowadays, is not *thinking* in its proper sense, in the sense of *techne*, a kind of 'bringing forth of the true' which belongs to *poesis*.

...to the Greeks *techne* means...to make something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way. The Greeks conceive of *techne*, producing, in terms of letting appear..

There was a time when the bringing forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. The *poesis* of the fine arts was also called *techne*. *Techne* belongs to *poesis*. From earliest times until Plato *techne* also linked to *episteme* – knowing in the widest sense. That is to be entirely at home in something, to understand. Such knowing is an

opening up. As opening up it is a revealing. Techne – reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us....

So we can begin to see from this very cursory view that Heidegger's project is to do with the revelation of being, through language and through a thinking that is more authentically related to its source.

However, for Henry the concept of Being belongs to human language and he says "language cannot blaze a trail to either reality or truth".

The reality of most individuals or groups of individuals escape the truth of history. For example, Henry says, that an examination of the Scriptures cannot tell us about Christ's actions or existence. He says it is precisely when one requires of a thing, specifically in this case the individual, to show itself that this individual and by definition the whole of mankind, since mankind is an "undetermined multitude of individuals", (Henry's words) , that it slips beyond this requirement and beyond the truth of history. So then history, faced with the disappearance of its subject has to shift its target and look instead to texts. In terms of Christ or God for example the New Testament becomes the only source of access to what these texts are about. Yet strangely enough the scriptures themselves form the same critique of language: language leaves reality outside of itself. The only power left to language says Henry, is to lie. This is a strong statement but Henry insists that language contains nothing of the reality of the thing it describes.

For Henry it is not being that is a matter for concern. Being belongs to what is shown to us in the world. The world is where things show themselves as phenomena but this showing is what Henry calls process of principled de-realization.

Henry says that in order to understand life, it is necessary to rule out of its analysis the concept of being. In relation to life we cannot say "Life is". For Henry Life 'is' not since it is an occurrence which is a process of occurring without end:

life plunges into itself, crushes against itself, experiences itself, enjoys itself, constantly producing its own essence, inasmuch as that essence consists in this enjoyment of itself and is exhausted in it. Thus life continuously engenders itself

The world for Henry is not a thing or set of things or beings but a horizon of light or visibility. He says (and I am simplifying here) that things are reduced to whatever shows itself to consciousness, as phenomena. The phenomena of consciousness are its representations, its objects, the things that are placed before it. To re-present anything for oneself is in terms of consciousness, a placing before oneself. The fact of being placed before is what constitutes pure consciousness. The fact of being placed before is the fact of being placed outside. The 'outside' as such is the world. So Henry concludes here that "consciousness in no way refers to a truth of another order than the truth of the world." This truth of the world is:

...is a placing outside, seizing everything to render it manifest...This putting-outside-itself by no means signifies a simple transfer of the thing from one place to another- as if, in such a displacement, it remained similar to itself.... Rather, this coming –into appearance in the “outside itself” of the world signifies that it is the thing itself that finds itself cast outside itself. It is fractured , broken, cleaved in two, stripped of its own reality- in such a way that, now deprived of that reality that was its own, emptied of its flesh, it is no longer outside itself in the worlds image, but just as its own skin, a simple image, in effect, a transparent film, a surface without thickness, a piece of naked externality offered to a gaze that slides over it without being able to penetrate it or reach anything but empty appearance.

This making seen which destroys is time. The process of principled de-realization does not mean that something which appears has its original state of reality abolished in the fact of appearing. For Henry it means that “from the beginning this thing was passing away”. Time is not a slipping from the present to the past. There is no present in time. In time things come into appearance as already dead. Because its power to make things manifest resides in the outside itself, then time “annihilates everything it exhibits”.

It is only through living that we can experience what Henry calls reality, but living is not possible in the world , only in Life For Henry we as human beings are livings, we partake of life and experience life but “We ourselves are not life as such but our life, certainly our innermost experience of ourselves as living, is generated by life “

It seems that Life here has nothing to do with subjectivity . Living seems to be the ability to be affected, in what Henry calls the “pathetik phenomenological substance of living”, which enables us to experience ourselves not as separate from Life but in an experiencing which is the same as that which is experienced.

I used to attend a Russian evening class. Once during a coffee break I was chatting with a young man from the class. I liked him. He was funny and intelligent. We were discussing why we were doing the course. I asked him what his reason was. He said, “ This may sound strange to you but it was a prophecy”. He told me that he had been very unhappy, indeed at rock bottom. He had been dabbling in all sorts of New-Age practices, trying to find a way out of his situation. Then one morning he woke up and heard a voice saying to him “ If you believe in magic, why can’t you believe in me?” He knew that the voice was Jesus. Not God, he said, but Jesus. The voice prophesied that he would be a missionary in Russia and so he had begun the class.

Part 3

One reason I was so interested in Henry was because what he was saying seemed to me to be related to something that I have been interested in for some time and that is what Kierkegaard calls 'inwardness'.

Even if there is no form of representation that can show us what experience is for another, is there something in Kierkegaard and Henry, which suggests that within this experience of profound interiority which *admits no outside*, there could be a kind of movement which breaks past interiority through the inside to the outside as it were? How else to describe it? We tend to think of a limit as reaching towards the maximum outward edge. What about limits that are at the inner edge, where movement is towards the minimum possibility? What would happen if that limit were breached, the limit of the inside?

Although for Kierkegaard, the impetus for decision ultimately lies with an external authority, for example God, he states that "all decisiveness adheres in subjectivity". A relationship to this authority is never assured and remains hidden even to the one who has faith. The paradox of faith of Kierkegaard lies in the incommensurability between interiority and exteriority.

Kierkegaard's project is a constant and uncompromising concern with faith and the paradoxical, relation of the human subject with God, a God who is beyond proof, and whose existence is a question of faith in the most radical sense.

For Kierkegaard, it is passion, not reflection that is needed in order to make the leap of faith. However faith is constantly bound up with reason, in that it is the passion of reason he says which drives reason to its own downfall.

Kierkegaard criticises the kind of exhaustive reflection typical of thinkers like Hegel which he sees as trying to get us back to a beginning; the source of being and the source of thought. He says that any beginning reached through this process must be reached only arbitrarily, when reflection becomes tired, bored or forcibly stopped.

For Kierkegaard there cannot be an existential system. To seek a beginning is to seek to comprehend what happens in this moment of transition from non-being to being. However this moment is between motion and rest, neither being nor non-being. And yet it is in this moment that we truly reside as becoming –subject. There is no beginning for us, no before, at least not one that we can really know about.

In this sense then a beginning, any beginning, always appears to us a severance from an absolute beginning. Our relation to origin is always one of disjuncture and is only through repetition that we can rediscover this disjuncture. Kierkegaard suggests that instead of talking or dreaming about an absolute beginning we could talk about a 'leap'. This leap is faith.

The moment where reason and unreason collide is precisely where truth is discovered; the condition of our subjectivity, discovered not through reflection but by passion.

The leap of faith is not so much it seems a leap *over* or *through* something (like a chasm or abyss) but more like a leap *into* something. I have been thinking of it recently like this breach of the limit of the inside that I mentioned before, a sudden implosion. For although Kierkegaard's leap of faith is transformative, it has nothing external about it. It is the quality or condition of *inwardness* that Kierkegaard is careful to maintain in his conception of faith.

Faith for Kierkegaard requires that the subject, in order to authentically inhabit subjectivity, must continuously *subject itself* to the unknown. More than this in *subjecting itself* to the unknown, the subject discovers something but the nature of this something cannot be known, at least objectively.

Faith is a 'monstrous paradox', for Kierkegaard; if someone has faith, then he or she exiles themselves from the realm of human discourse, the ethical⁴, which is a product of human thinking

You may remember here Abraham's trial of faith which is the basis for Kierkegaard's great work *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his only son. At the very moment when Abraham is about to bring the knife down on Isaac, God substitutes a ram in his place and the ram is sacrificed instead. Here Abraham could not speak about this decision since he did not know why God had asked him to kill his son nor why he had decided to obey. Derrida says of Abraham's decision :

Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no-one can die in my place, no-one can make a decision, what we call "a decision" in my place.

Here the locus of decision could be said to be this state of inwardness which cannot show itself in the world or justify itself in the world's terms.

Even if one were able to render the whole content of faith into conceptual form it would not follow that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it came to one

Faith in Kierkegaard brings about a transformation, but one which brings us back to ourselves as ourselves. Abraham's decision meant that he received Isaac back again on the proper basis, that is as a gift from God.

The case of Adolph Peter Adler illustrates something of what it is that is at stake for Kierkegaard in the notion of inwardness. Adler was a Magister of Theology in Copenhagen, who claimed to have had a revelation from Christ. Kierkegaard who knew Adler, bought his four books which he published simultaneously and which contained sacred verses and insights that he claimed were from Jesus. Kierkegaard subsequently wrote *The Book on Adler*, a scathing critique of

⁴ See *Fear and Trembling* and Derrida's discussion of it in *Gift of Death*

Adler in philosophical and personal terms. George Steiner who writes about it in his essay “The Wound of Negativity: Two Kierkegaard Texts” says that for Kierkegaard,

The crux of the Adler affair is that of ‘calling’, in the very strongest sense of the term. How does a human being know that he/she is being summoned by God? How can human sensibility and intellect differentiate between ecstatic, deeply felt intimation of divine solicitation, whose actual sources are those of personal need or emotion, and the authentic word of God?

For Kierkegaard there remained the *possibility* that Adolph Peter Adler has received direct communication from Christ. Even if the manner in which Adler expressed himself was undignified or that he was potentially prone to hallucinations or delusions, his claim survived Kierkegaard’s criticism and negation. It was, as Kierkegaard claimed, both indefensible and at the same time inviolable. How can we know for sure that Adler was not speaking the truth?

In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard calls God “this unknown something... with which the Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion with the result of unsettling even man’s knowledge of himself”

Derrida suggests that God is another name for “that structure of invisible interiority that is called, [in Kierkegaard’s sense], subjectivity”.

We should stop thinking about God as someone over there, transcendent... Then we might say; God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. Once such a structure of conscience exists, of being-with-oneself. Of speaking, that is, of producing invisible sense, once I have within me, thanks to the invisible word as such, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself, once I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that) I call myself God – a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from “God calls me”, for it is on that condition that I call myself or that I am called in secret. God is in me, he is the absolute “me” or “self”

Kierkegaard’s profoundly Christian view, too Christian even for many who call themselves Christians, may not sit easily with us ‘nowadays’. Contemporary critics might try to rescue Kierkegaard’s writing from the fate of Christianity by bracketing out sections of the text they find unpalatable. However those words remain like shadows which cannot disappear; they are not in the writing of Kierkegaard but in us and through them Kierkegaard, in all of his work, refers us back to the realm of inwardness.

Conclusion

I am wondering if this talk of God or the unknown something as a structure of interiority or subjectivity is a way of trying to bring it back into the realms of what is understandable or acceptable in terms we have already decided upon? Is this sphere of inwardness where we are at the moment of decision and yet as long as we *are subjects* we are at the same time banished from it? If as Kierkegaard says decisiveness adheres in subjectivity is it that as long as decisiveness is subjective then it is there that we can be found clinging to that from which we are forever banished, at least as thinkers. In the leap perhaps we become what Henry would call Livings?

It seems to me lately that when I am thinking about subjectivity it is like that effect when you look at a light too long and then when you look away there is a coloured dot in front of your eyes. Wherever you look it is there. Like Kierkegaard's eternal consciousness '*neither here nor there only an ubique et nusquam (everywhere and nowhere)*'