

# Looks of Love: The Seducer and the Christ

*George Pattison*

Seeing and being seen are, from the beginning, constant themes in Kierkegaard's authorship. Not the least significant aspect of the many variations he plays upon them is that not only are they constant, they also emerge in quite varied contexts. At the one extreme, they are central to his characterization of what I have called the spectacular city, whose social ambitions are summed up in the injunction to see and be seen – where seeing, as Heiberg had already commented, usually meant little more than gaping. This is the city that is mirrored in outings to the Deer Park, Tivoli and, in a darker tone, aesthetes and seducers. Whether in its popular or in its sophisticated forms, however, I suggest that Kierkegaard's last word on it is that it is the city of the evil one, whose own essence is distilled into his "glittering look" (*SV3* 14, 156<sup>1</sup>). At the other extreme, in the inward life of faith, it is true that the themes of seeing and being seen might appear to be buried beneath the protective mantle of hidden inwardness, or the divine forgetfulness in which even the thought of sin is obliterated. Yet, as I hope to illustrate, this divine forgetfulness can itself be portrayed as a kind of seeing, namely, a kind of seeing that overlooks sin because its eye is fixed upon the person of the penitent sinner, a kind of seeing that is the look of love. Importantly, this is not a figure that only emerges late in Kierkegaard's authorship, it is there from the beginning (at least from 1843), and that therefore constitutes an accompanying counterpoint to the dazzling sights and glittering eyes of the spectacular city.

I shall begin with a few remarks about the optics of the spectacular city and, in particular, of the Seducer. I shall then proceed to say something about Kierkegaard's understanding of conscience, which hinges on the idea of an internalized "being seen", akin to what Don Cupitt has called the "eyes of God" motif in religious thought. Lastly, I shall come to main point

of my paper, namely the look of love with which Christ encounters “the woman who was a sinner” of Luke Chapter 7. This, I believe, serves Kierkegaard as one of the pivotal moments of scripture, an icon, if one wills, of how a fulfilled relation to God in Christ might appear, and, as such, a definitive icon of the Christ himself. That this woman has been a less prominent “figure of faith” in the secondary literature than, say, Abraham or the blood-witness is not so much a fault of the texts themselves, but reflects the distortions of the history of reception. That is not to say the Abraham and the blood-witness are negligible figures, but simply that if they are seen without the light cast by the sinful woman, then decisive elements of the Christ-relationship remain unclarified. As for Christ himself, I suggest that the image of Christ seen here similarly supplements the picture offered, on the one hand, by the virtually incognito Christ of, say, *Philosophical Fragments*, or the “man of sorrows”, cross-carrying and dying for us who becomes so prominent in the later works. Again, I would use the word “pivotal”, because although the message of the look of love with which Christ meets the sinful woman is said by Kierkegaard to be taken over or deepened by the knowledge of his sacrificial death, the encounter between them is paradigmatic for how that sacrificial death can be construed as ‘saving’. Importantly for the coherence of Kierkegaard’s authorship this scenario of Christ and the sinful woman can also be read as a repetition of the aesthetics of seduction – in which, however, all is changed from our first encounter with seduction in the pages of *Either/Or*.

First, then, some remarks on the optics of the spectacular city as they find expression in *The Seducer’s Diary*.

The very first entry in the diary, April 4<sup>th</sup>, contains a series of remarks about seeing and being seen that leave us in no doubt that its author is, or regards himself as, a virtuoso in exploiting the shifting perspectives of life in the spectacular city. The diary opens as a young girl is stepping down from a carriage. Unseen, Johannes watches her. Unseen – but not because he is lurking in the shadows: on the contrary – he is standing beneath a streetlight, which, he says, makes it quite impossible for her to see him, since ‘... one is only ever invisible to the extent that one is seen, but one is only ever seen to the extent that one sees ...’ (*SV3* 2, 291). What this intentionally provocative formulation seems to mean is that a man standing innocently in the gaslight will not attract attention in the same way as one glimpsed lurking in the shadows. It is the same principle that is invoked when in detective stories, the top secret documents are deliberately left on the hall table. They are not *seen* because no one pays much attention to

papers lying on a hall table. Yet there is also an equivocation in the use of see/ seen that goes further than this relatively commonplace observation. For, as the context makes clear, Johannes sees the girl, but she does not – yet – see him. If we literally applied the formula that ‘one is only ever seen to the extent that one sees’, it would seem that the girl cannot be seen by Johannes, since she does not see him. But this is precisely to miss the fundamental one-sidedness the Seducer’s visual practice: *she* is seen when and as he wants to see her, but she can only see *him* when and as he wants to be seen, which means when and as he lets her see him by letting her see him seeing her. This occurs moments later when, as she turns into a sale, he steps out of the light and lets his ‘side-glance’ fall upon her – and ‘one doesn’t forget my side-glance so easily’ (SV3 2, 293). It would be easy, of course, to wax ironical over the vanity of Kierkegaard’s pretensions at this point, if it were not for the fact that this side-glance has indeed become an unforgettable topos of modern European literature! But back to the streets of Copenhagen and to the moment, ‘the second of decision’, in which the Seducer’s side-glance falls upon the seventeen year old girl. ‘You blush; your bosom too full to find relief in breath; your look is angry, proudly contemptuous; there is a prayer, a tear, in your eyes; both are equally beautiful and I am equally entitled to both, for I can as well be the one as the other’ (SV3 2, 292). Here, then, we see, literally see, the reality of the power-play between the Seducer and those he allows to see him. Forget seduction, this side-glance is already a violent breaching of the integrity of its victim, taken hostage by a gaze in which she is merely seen and cannot see, cannot return to her proper subjectivity, except in the measure that his eye allows. But Johannes is not finished. The affair of the side-glance was, after all, the affair of a second. Now – ‘mischievously’, as he admits – he follows her in to the sale and, as she pores over the goods, he watches her in a mirror, seeing but unseen. ‘Unhappy mirror,’ he muses, ‘which can indeed take her image but not her, unhappy mirror, which cannot keep her image in secrecy, hiding it from the whole world, but, on the contrary, can only betray it to others as it does now to me’ (SV3 2, 292). How many people resemble the mirror, he thinks, reflecting only what is given in the passing moment of experience, lacking the capacity to create a ‘recollected image in the very moment of presence’ (SV3 2, 292). This, then, is the epitome of what his own ‘look’ can achieve: the creation of an image that is defining for a given situation, ‘defining’ not only for him and his ‘recollection’, but also for the other whose being is also caught in this image.

Of course, there is a whole other angle on this, from which the Seducer-

er might himself be seen as a self-condemned 'unhappy lover of recollection' and as the alter ego of the melancholy solipsist of the *Diapsalmata*, whose sorrow is the castle to which he returns after each foray into reality to brood upon the images he has brought back, weaving them into the tapestries that line his inner walls and that give him a grey substitute for the life he doesn't live. For our present purposes, however, we take him at his word, and see him as and to the extent that he wishes us to see him.

We shall return to the Seducer, but now I would like to proceed to the question of conscience. If the Seducer's universe is defined by his own subjective gaze, the existence of one in whom conscience has awoken is an existence that learns to see itself in the eyes of another. This finds striking exemplification in what some readers find one of Kierkegaard's weirder ideas. In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and again, at greater length, in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard recommends the practice of recollecting the dead, not, as in some forms of Christian spirituality, for the benefit of the departed soul itself, but for the moral and religious improvement of the one doing the remembering. How would it be, he reflects, 'if one of those distinguished ones, whose memory is preserved by the crowd, in the manner of the crowd, with noisy festivities and shouting, if – and this is something far more serious – if he came to you and visited you so that you would then have to dare defend your actions in the face of his testing gaze' (SV3 11, 126). Such a thought-experiment reverses the perspective of would-be Seducers, since I, the subject, am no longer the originator of the gaze that defines my world: instead I am the one scrutinized. In this reversal I begin to see myself with the eyes of another. In *Works of Love* the act of remembering the departed is made into a kind of spiritual exercise through which I learn to practice disinterestedness, freedom and faithfulness, measuring myself not only against my ability to continue loving in the absence of the loved object (this would still be a subject-centred asceticism), but also against the resistance of the departed to subjective manipulation. A dead person, Kierkegaard admits, 'is not a real object, he is only the occasion which constantly reveals what dwells in [the hearts of] the living person who relates to him ...' (SV3 12, 331). And,

... be above all attentive to what you say to the departed. You can maybe say 'I will never forget you' calmly enough to a living person and, when once a few years have passed, you will hopefully both have blithely forgotten everything ... [But] When you say "I will never forget you" to one of the departed, it is as if he answered: 'Good, and be assured that I shall never

forget that you have said it'. And even if all those living were to assure you that he had forgotten it, you would not hear it from the dead man's own lips. No, he goes his way, but he is not *altered*' (SV3 12, 339).

One who remembers the departed in this way, is no longer the centre of his own universe, he is one accused, we could say, held to account, watched in every move he makes by another.

Something analogous occurs when I listen in an appropriate manner to a religious address or read an uplifting discourse, as *Uplifting Discourses in Various Spirits* also famously illustrates. The truly attentive listener or reader, we are told, is to conceive of himself not as the spectator of somebody else's spiritual trial, but as being himself 'on stage', the object of another's critical gaze. Only this other is no longer merely another human (as the departed continue to be, even in their transfigured or eternal state), it is God himself. Under this gaze, as under that of one of the 'transfigured ones', the inner being of a person is revealed, and we are enabled and required to see ourselves as we truly are: 'God's presence is decisive, and it alters everything. As soon as God is present, every human being has the task, before God, to attend to himself,' (SV3 11, 115). But this is a self-attention very different from that of the narcissistic self-absorption of the extreme aesthete, precisely because it is a self-attention refracted through the gaze of another.

The reorientation of the gaze brought about by remembering the dead and appropriately attending to the religious discourse can also be named the awakening of conscience. For, as Kierkegaard writes in the Conclusion to *Works of Love*, 'In conscience it is God who looks at a person, so that a person will look to him in all things' (SV3 12, 359). The deliberateness with which Kierkegaard has recourse to the metaphors of vision at this point is signalled by the manner in which he introduces this definition of conscience: '... the clever educator chooses to educate by means of the eyes. He takes each individual child's eyes away, that is, he forces the child to look to him in everything ... The child who is being educated can easily imagine that his relation to his chums and the little world that they form is reality, against which the eye of the teacher teaches him that all this is being used for the child's education' (SV3 12, 359). The child, in other words, finds itself like the young girl caught by the eye of the Seducer, its own view of the world is suspended and it is made to see with another's eyes and thus to see that there is more to the world than, left to itself, it could ever possibly see. It is, then, in this way that God educates by his gaze, breaking

open the illusions of a would-be self-sufficient finitude, an autonomic striving that believes itself capable of creating its own world, defining its own values, controlling its relations to others. For those who know that the eyes of God are always watching, there is always a larger perspective, a wider horizon than that within which they currently interpret and act upon the world. Every reflection, every interpretation, every action is therefore necessarily and in principle revisable in the sense that its meaning is potentially different from what we ourselves have seen in it. Every action must be ventured in fear and trembling and with the consideration that we may be mistaken. This, we might say, is a view of conscience in which God is primarily *the accuser*. Those who know themselves to be watched by God in this way are those who know themselves to stand under accusation, who cannot answer for their own righteousness.

Here, then, is the metaphorical underpinning of the systematic definition of sin in *The Sickness unto Death*: 'Sin is: before God, or having the idea of God despairingly not being willing to be oneself, or despairingly willing to be oneself,' in which, as is immediately added, 'That on which the emphasis falls is: *before God ...*' (SV3 15, 131). Beneath the abstract formulation 'before God', we are, I think, to read the depiction of human beings as being what and as they are by virtue of the way in which they are seen by God in a way that is now familiar with us, or, if a more Kantian interpretation of Kierkegaard is allowable, by virtue of the way in which they imagine themselves as open to the all-exposing gaze of God.

As we know, the ascending dialectic of *The Sickness unto Death* does not come to a halt with the category 'before God'. There is a yet further step, and that is the category 'before Christ'. Here too, I suggest, we are entitled to read into this expression the idea of being regarded by the Christ we find ourselves or imagine ourselves as being 'before'. Here too there is talk of a further 'potentiation' of sin, namely that to the condition of existing in despair one now further despairs by being offended at Christ. However, this offence is essentially the reflex, 'the acoustic illusion' as Kierkegaard elsewhere puts it, of what is offered in Christ, namely the forgiveness of sins. If existing 'before Christ' in the mode of despair is thus 'offence', then truly to exist before Christ, existing before Christ with an understanding of what that meant and accepting what it meant, would be to exist with the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins.

If linking the idea of conscience with the idea of existing before God leads us to think of ourselves as under accusation, the idea of existing before Christ, though structurally analogous to existence 'before God', thus

bespeaks deliverance from accusation, forgiveness, and the possibility of self acceptance. This is the true content of faith and, in the language of *The Sickness unto Death*, it is also what it means to exist as the selves we are when grounded transparently in the power that posits us. That power is not merely the power of donating being, but the power of bestowing forgiveness and so the power that enables self-acceptance. What we most truly 'are', then, is persons embraced by the forgiveness offered in Christ. The possibility of this forgiveness, moreover, meets us primarily in the form of self-consciousness in which we understand ourselves as 'before', that is, being beheld by Christ, held and transformed in his 'look of love'.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that it is the figure of 'the sinful woman' that gives us the clearest and certainly the most recurrent image of what it might mean to find ourselves held and transformed by this look. Importantly, she appears already in the three upbuilding discourses of 1843 (published on the same day as *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*), but she is also prominent in the three Friday communion discourses of September 1849 ('*The High Priest*' – '*The Tax-Collector*' – '*The Woman who was a Sinner*'), said by Kierkegaard to be 'related to the last pseudonym Anti-Climacus' or to be 'parallel to Anti-Climacus',<sup>3</sup> in the single *Upbuilding Discourse* of December 1850 and the *Two Discourses at the Friday Communion*, which though published in August 1851 is assigned by Kierkegaard to the late summer of 1849. The sinful woman thus provides a point of thematic continuity between the early upbuilding discourses, regarded by most commentators as reflecting a very low stage in Kierkegaardian religiousness, and *The Sickness unto Death*, regarded by most commentators as so elevated that Kierkegaard did not dare put his name to it. But the argument is not only about continuity, it is also about coherence. I propose that this sinful woman offers a vantage-point from which to see the essential unity of Kierkegaard's religious thought, the upbuilding and the radically Christian works, and providing a vital perspective on how the religious works in general 'answer' to the challenge of the aesthetic.

There are two biblical texts that play an especially important role in Kierkegaard's use of the sinful woman. The first, and most obvious, is Luke 7. 37ff., where we encounter the story of the sinful woman who bursts in to a dinner party being held for Jesus by Simon the Pharisee, and falls at Jesus' feet, weeping over them, anointing them with oil and washing them with her hair before hearing him say (after a polemical exchange with his host), 'Your sins are forgiven' and 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Lk 7. 48, 50). The other is 1 Peter 4.7 'Love shall cover a multitude of sins'. The

link is provided by the exchange between Jesus and Simon in Luke 7, where Jesus tells the mini-parable of the two men indebted to a moneylender, one owing five hundred silver pieces, the other fifty. As neither of them can pay, the moneylender cancels the debt. Jesus compels his host to concede that the one who is forgiven most, will love most. He then enumerates the signs by which the woman has shown her love, which, he says, 'proves that her many sins have been forgiven' (Lk 7. 47).

It is the text of 1 Peter that is taken for the first two of the *Three Upbuilding Discourses* of 1843. In the first of these it is relevant to the theme of seeing, being seen and the look of love that Kierkegaard is provoked by the idea of concealment implied in the text to ask whether it is an imperfection in love not to see the multitude of sins that are often really out there to be seen. He comments 'What it comes down to is not only what one sees, but what one sees comes down to how one sees. For looking (*Betrågning*) in general is not just receptive, a matter of discovering, but is also productive, and insofar as it is this, then it is indeed decisive how the one who looks himself is' (SV3 4, 61). Of course, he concedes, insofar as the object in question belongs to the objective world, the subjective state of the observer is not so important. However, when 'the object being looked at belongs to the world of spirit, it is so much the more important how [the one looking] is in his innermost being. For everything in the spiritual world can only be acquired freely, but what is acquired freely is also something produced' (SV3 4, 61). An evil eye may therefore discover much that the look of love overlooks, but, conversely, an evil eye will not see God.

These elucidations can readily be applied to the sinful woman. In the second of the three discourses she makes her first appearance in the authorship. Kierkegaard rapidly sketches the scene as depicted in Luke. He reminds us that 'A woman could not be an invited guest, this one least of all, for the Pharisees knew that she was a sinner. If nothing else had been able to frighten her and hold her back, the proud contempt of the Pharisees, their silent ill-will, their holy indignation could well have scared her off' (SV3 4, 74-5). The woman is under accusation, but her love gives her the courage to force her way past her accusers to the feet of the Saviour, where, as Kierkegaard puts it, she is given 'the grace, as it were, to weep herself out of herself and weep herself into love's repose' (SV3 4, 75). However, as Kierkegaard goes on to ask, if love can thus overcome the guilt of one under accusation, does it follow that it will also overcome the accusation itself. Surely justice has its rights and will not be bribed by love. But love also has its right, 'for he who judges, has his demands, but he, who has his



demands, he is seeking, and he “who hides the multitude of sins, is seeking love” (Proverbs 17.9); but he, who finds love, he hides the multitude of sins; for he who finds what he was seeking, he indeed hides what he was not seeking’ (SV3 4, 76). And so Kierkegaard once more retells the story of Luke 7. This time the woman is shown bent over as she enters, bearing the weight of the multitude of her sins, the judgement of the Pharisees legible in their faces, so that all there was to see was a multitude of sins. Then, continues Kierkegaard ‘love discovered what the world was hiding – the love in her; and as this had not fully triumphed in her, the Saviour’s love came to her aid ... and he made the love in her powerful enough to cover the multitude of sins, the love, that is, that was already there, for “her many sins were forgiven, because she loved much”’ (SV3 4, 76–7).

When, six years later, Kierkegaard returns to this scenario in the three Friday Communion discourses, it is with this element of the story, that ‘she loved much’, that he begins, beginning already in the opening prayer whose introductory petition asks Christ to inflame the love in us that we might love Him much. So too when Kierkegaard comes to the exposition, that ‘she loved much’ is once more the starting-point. His retelling of the story is more complex, more filled out with descriptive chiaroscuro than in the earlier discourse. The shame and indignity of the woman’s status and the judgemental posture of the Pharisees is elaborated on and intensified. She has become the epitome of sin, venturing into the very presence of ‘the Holy’. Even the festivity of the occasion is used to heighten the tension, as Kierkegaard contrasts the privacy of the Church’s confessional with the public exposure of letting her sin be seen in the midst of such a festive gathering. That she should have to do this is not merely hard, it is ‘cruel’ (SV3 14, 195). Nevertheless, she does it and, at the feet of the Lord she enacts the impossibility of her situation, *doing* nothing, because she *is* nothing, and in thus *becoming nothing*, in entire self-forgetfulness, she becomes a ‘sign’, ‘an image’. Even Christ himself seems to regard her as nothing, speaking about her but not to her, as he tells Simon that her sins are forgiven, ‘And it is almost as if the Saviour himself, for a moment, regarded her and the situation thus, as if she was not an actual person but an image ... it is almost as if he turned her into an image, a parable – and yet that very thing was happening in the same moment right there’ (SV3 14, 197). Her self-forgetfulness and Christ’s response transform her into ‘an image ... a recollection’ (SV3 14, 198) or ‘an eternal image’ (SV3 14, 198). And what is she an ‘eternal image’, an icon, of? She is an eternal image both of the forgiveness of sins and of the ‘much love’ that, as Kierkegaard writes here, are one and the

same. This, more precisely, suggests to Kierkegaard that whilst it is true that all our sins are forgiven 'in Christ' the truth of that forgiveness must be made true by each individual, and each individual can do that only by taking to heart the image of this woman and 'loving much': '... by her great love she made herself – if I dare put it like this – necessary to the Saviour, for that there is forgiveness of sins, which he earned, is made true by her, who loved much' (SV3 14, 199). Kierkegaard's 'if I dare put it like this' indicates that he is conscious of being close to or beyond the margin of what is permissible within the framework of Protestant dogmatics, but that he is prepared to take such risks on her behalf also underlines the importance that the sinful woman has for him. In the single *Upbuilding Discourse* of December 1850, also devoted to her, Kierkegaard once more touches on the delicate question as to whether her love is somehow to be regarded as meriting forgiveness, only, in typically Kierkegaardian style, he does so obliquely. Referring back to Jesus' word that 'her many sins are forgiven because she loved much', Kierkegaard comments that he presumes that *she* simply didn't hear this word, or misheard it, believing him to have said that it was because *he* loved much that her many sins were forgiven, so that it was his own infinite love he was talking about (SV3 17, 20). In this way, Kierkegaard implies, the logic of love, seen from the inside, simply does not allow for the kind of talk about merit that has bothered dogmaticians. The question of 'earning' forgiveness can only arise for those who are outside the orbit of love, for love regards itself as nothing, the other as everything, and it could never arise in the heart of love to talk of merit on its own part. Similarly, in the first of the discourses of summer 1851, where the text is again taken from Luke 7 (v. 47 'To whom little is forgiven loves little'), although the woman is not directly mentioned, Kierkegaard expressly brushes aside the objection that he is making it sound as if love somehow earns forgiveness.

Pay attention now and see how we are, though, not entering into the unhappy realm of merit, but how everything remains within love. When you love much, much is forgiven you – and when much is forgiven you, you love much. See here the blessed retroaction of salvation in love! First, you love much, and much is forgiven you – oh, look and see how love then increases; that so much has been forgiven you, this loves forth love once more, and you love much because much has been forgiven you! (SV3 17, 37)

In the 'eternal image' of the sinful woman weeping at the feet of the Lord, then, we have what is for Kierkegaard the perfect expression of such a virtuous circle of love begetting love in a movement that can also be described from the human side as coming to accept the forgiveness of sins.

This circularity might also be figured as a mirroring, namely, the mirroring of her needy love in Christ's giving love, and the mirroring of his love in hers. As such it also recalls several of the climactic moments of earlier upbuilding discourses, where the self that is rightly placed in relation to God is said by Kierkegaard to be transparent to or to reflect the light of the divine presence in the same way that a completely still sea reflects the light of the sky. In the last of the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* this state is identified with that of becoming as nothing, a state, we might say, of complete emptiness. In the first part of *Upbuilding Discourses* the same imagery recurs to describe the soul that has truly learned to will one thing and to gather itself into the serenity of the single desire. So too the woman of the 1850 discourse is described, firstly, as someone who was entirely taken up with one thought: 'everything else had become indifferent: everything temporal, earthly, worldly, honour, dignity, good times, the future, family, friends, the judgement of others, and she bore every care lightly, whatever it might be, almost as if it were nothing, because only one thing unconditionally concerned her enough to care about it: her sin' (*SV3* 17, 17), although, as Kierkegaard shortly afterwards comments, this is not quite right, because the one thing that really concerned her unconditionally was 'to find forgiveness' (*SV3* 17, 17). Added to this, she is also described as someone who realized that, in relation to this – her one all-consuming concern, her one great passion – that 'in relation to finding forgiveness she was herself able to do nothing at all' (*SV3* 17, 18). 'She enters in. She fully understands that she is herself able to do nothing. Therefore she does not give herself over to passionate cries of self-accusation, as if this might bring her closer to being saved or make her more well-pleasing to God; she does not make an excessive fuss and, truly, no one could have accused her of that. No, she does nothing at all, she is silent – she weeps' (*SV3* 17, 19).

As one who both wills one thing and one who sinks down into her own nothingness, she is indeed the human counterpart of the sea that has become still and transparent and so able to mirror the sheer infinity of the divine love.

Before we leave these more narrowly theological topics and return to the question as to what such a scene might mean for the citizens of the nineteenth century spectacular city, I note that whereas in the three dis-

courses of 1849 the woman is spoken of in terms that make of her an almost unsurpassable icon of the forgiveness of sins, both the single discourse of 1850 and the second of the two discourses of 1851 add that there is one thing more to take into account, or, rather two very closely connected things. The first is that, as Kierkegaard puts it in the single discourse, 'we have a comfort that she didn't have', that is, the comfort derived from knowledge of the Saviour's death. Both here and in the 1851 discourse this is further connected to the setting in which the discourses are being spoken, the Communion service, and the presence of Christ's body in the sacrament of the altar.

Both these points relate to the theme of hiddenness and concealment that runs through all of these discourses. This is also, according to Kierkegaard, a feature of the Friday Communion itself, as he emphasizes in the opening words of one of the communion addresses from *Christian Discourses*, where he contrast the experience of going to Church on a Sunday, when one hails other passers-by as fellow Churchgoers, with that of going through the busy streets on a Friday morning – 'In full view of all, yet hidden: [that is how] the individual went to Church today, hidden, or on the hidden path, for no one knew what path he trod, no passer-by thought you were going to God's house ... you went hidden amongst the many like a stranger' (SV3 13, 255). In the midst of the spectacular city, then, the communicant treads a secret path; indeed, Kierkegaard says, it is not even as if he is going to Church, he is going to the altar, going to seek the forgiveness of sins. For the forgiveness of sins is, in itself, a secret work, secret from the world and its condemning gaze, secret from the devil and his 'glittering eye, which looks as if it could penetrate earth and sea and the most hidden secret places of the heart' (SV3 14, 156). But the ones who know their need of God, who seek forgiveness, who love much, are ones who are hidden from themselves, lost in what Kierkegaard describes in the discourse on the Pharisee and the tax-collector as a 'vertigo' of the infinite, in which the eye can find nothing on which to fix (SV3 14, 185f.). Even conscience is suspended in such a vertiginous loss of vision, for there can be no more talk of a, so to speak, distanced self-relation in which I view myself 'as if' with the eyes of another. In this perspective there really is nothing in the heart of the penitent sinner for the 'glittering eye' of the devil to see! All that is to be seen here is what Christ gives to be seen by himself seeing the scene in such a way as to make it into an 'eternal image'.

But it would seem that there is a yet stronger expression of this secret work of forgiveness than that offered by the woman who was a sinner. For

the comfort which we have that she did not have, is knowledge of his saving death for the forgiveness of sins. In other words, what we see in the icon of the woman is an immediate expression of *Christ's* 'love for sinners free'; in his word to the woman, as to others, Jesus pledged his life, in love: but, as Kierkegaard puts it, 'when is it easiest to believe, and when is the comfort greatest? Is it when the beloved says, I will do it – or when he has done it?' (*SV3* 17, 22). In this case, of course, 'doing it' meant, precisely, Jesus giving his life on the cross. This death, re-presented at the altar, is therefore more than a word of forgiveness, it is also a word of atonement.

One hears talk about works of love, and there are many such that can be named. But when love's work or *the* work of love is spoken of, then there is, yes, then there is but one work, and astonishingly enough, you know immediately what is being talked about, it is about him, about Jesus Christ, about his atoning death which covers a multitude of sins. This is what is proclaimed from the altar, for if it is his life that is proclaimed from the pulpit, it is his death that is proclaimed at the altar (*SV3* 17, 46).

If the look of love that meets the sinful woman in answer to the love that, from her side, expresses itself in her downcast eyes, the death of Christ 'quite literally', Kierkegaard says (*SV3* 17, 45), covers the multitude of sins with his '*holy body*' (*SV3* 17, 45), hiding them both from the judging gaze of righteousness and from that of anxious repentance.

Yet if Kierkegaard in this way insists that, finally, the sacramental proclamation of Christ crucified must take precedence over the icon of the sinful woman who loved much, the way in which he places these two images alongside one another raises a further interesting question which has important implications for our view of Kierkegaard's theology, understanding that term in the narrow sense of the formal academic discourse of Christian theology characteristic of Protestant Europe in Kierkegaard's time.

It is clear from several of the Friday Communion discourses that Kierkegaard has no problems in speaking the language of mainstream Western atonement theory, that Jesus's death on the cross was as a sacrifice for sin, 'making satisfaction', and that he died for me, in my place, doing what I could not do to secure forgiveness for my sins. By setting his most dogmatically mainstream reflections on Christ's death in such proximity to the woman who was a sinner, however, Kierkegaard implicitly offers a subtly different take from that of conventional atonement theory, a take which

seems to place him within the paradigm of Schleiermacher's revisionary approach. For where the classic formulations of atonement theory make clear that what must be satisfied is God's righteous condemnation of sin, and what must be suffered is the punishment due on account of that sin, Kierkegaard allows us to see the movement culminating in Christ's death as an extension of the exchange of love seen in the icon of the sinful woman. This death is, so to speak, a seeing-through or enactment of the offer of love made in his life, not the execution of a contract that is, as in much atonement theory, virtually independent of his lived ministry. The death, in other words, is not being understood by Kierkegaard as something other than the life but as fulfilling the promise made in and by a life of a love. Nor does it seem that the question as to *how* God's righteousness is to be placated is of great significance for Kierkegaard, as it is in classic atonement theory. If there is a righteous indignation that has to be propitiated by Christ's death, a wrath that must be covered, it is precisely the (un)righteous indignation of human justice. Christ, always for Kierkegaard the God-Man, does not express anything other than what is the essential will of God himself. The look of love with which Christ transforms our penitent love for him into an eternal image of forgiveness, is God's own look of love.

There is one thing more to add. In the scenario of the sinful women at the feet of Christ, in the way in which he turns her into an image, albeit an eternal image, there is something disturbingly reminiscent of the Seducer. Wasn't it the Seducer's forte to turn young women – usually, of course, innocent young women and not well-experienced sinful women – into 'images', so that they have no alternative but to 'be' the way he sees them? Is Christ, then, also a kind of Seducer, turning real life sinful women into 'recollected images', Seducer-like trapping them in the role of being-for-another?

How Kierkegaard might answer such a charge has already been implicitly suggested, however. Recall Johannes' description of the girl's reaction to his 'side-glance': 'You blush; your bosom too full to find relief in breath; your look is angry, proudly contemptuous; there is a prayer, a tear, in your eyes; both are equally beautiful and I am equally entitled to both, for I can as well be the one as the other' (*SV3* 2, 292). This is indeed a portrayal of someone who has been violated, whose personal space has been broken into and commandeered by an alien presence. It is of the essence of the scene that Johannes has taken her by surprise, forced himself upon her, even if only in the form of the famed 'side-glance'. But in every one of Kierkegaard's descriptions of the sinful woman, it is clear that it is she who

takes the initiative: it is her bursting-in, *her* love that sets the scene in motion, that calls forth his look of love; her love that almost, 'if I dare put it like this', is as necessary to him as his forgiveness is to her. Love calls forth love. If Johannes' side-glance epitomizes the 'glittering eye' of the violent mutual exploitation that is subliminally to be glimpsed in the spectacular masquerade of the human city, the virtuous cycle of love, imaged in the 'parable' of Luke 7, relived and repeated in the secrecy of the sacrament, refuses the allure of a culture of seduction and victimhood and, in doing so, sets a limit to that culture's ambition of self-totalization.

## Notes

1. All references to Kierkegaard's works are to the third edition (Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, eds., A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1962-64) and are given in the text by volume and page number; my translations.
2. A further illustration of this is found in the parable of the day labourer who finds himself chosen as the fiancé of the princess. See *SV3* 15, 137f.
3. See S. Kierkegaard, ed. Heiberg, Kuhr and Torsting, *Papirer*, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1909-48, X 2 A 126 and X 2 A 148.