

The Temporality of Truth: Deception and Self-deception in Ingmar Bergman's *The Best Intentions*

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Abstract

Ingmar Bergman's novel, *The Best Intentions*, is about the life and love of his parents. In transforming his parents into the characters, Henrik and Anna, Bergman offers a compelling analysis of the driving forces behind their real-life actions and choices. The paper draws from the work of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, to demonstrate the way that Bergman's analysis is connected to a particular understanding of the dynamics of the self. I ask: how and why are Bergman's two characters led to deception and self-deception during the most critical years of their lives? Bergman's intuitions about the embodied, relational self arguably have to do with his experience as a stage director. Through his work, he is aware of the way that players distinguish between their own selves and the roles, characters, voices, and identities they perform. Bergman exploits the techniques, concepts, and metaphors of the theater in the narration of this story of a 'life catastrophe'.

Keywords

Ingmar Bergman, Søren Kierkegaard, self, self-deception, role, character, voice,

The re-enactment of past experience

In stage productions, players work to develop their characters and the voices of their characters. They offer their own self-relations as a resource for bringing particular parts to life (STANISLAVSKI 1936/2003). Their willingness to search for the truth in order to present it to others underlies each and every performance. As a stage director and film maker, Ingmar Bergman was, of course, acutely aware of the dynamics involved. In this paper, I argue that his insights into the way that players and directors have to distinguish between self, role, character, and voice inform the composition and dialogues of his novel: *The Best Intentions* (*Den goda viljan*, 1991). The novel is an expedition into the terrain of human nature: love, desire, deception, self-deception, anxiety, despair, and loneliness. Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of the self meticulously analyzes the meaning of each of these concepts. For this reason, I draw from his work, *The Sickness unto Death* (1849/2004), in my reading of *The Best Intentions*. However, *The Best Intentions*, is also a personal project of identity as well as a re-enactment of the past. Bergman proceeds in recovering the meaning behind the decisions and actions of the historical agents under study.

Bergman published the novel in 1991. It was also produced as a Swedish dramatic film and television series, directed by Bille August. It is the story of the true love and 'life catastrophe' of Bergman's parents. They meet and fall in love in 1909. The novel covers the early years of their conflict-ridden relationship and marriage. They separate in 1917, but then reunite as Ingmar is about to be born in 1918. The two main characters, Henrik and Anna, are partly narrated from the perspective of their son who, as the teller of the story, remembers and imagines. The novel is an investigation of his parents' emotional lives: how and why did they turn out the way they did? Eventually, of course, it points to Bergman's life as well: '[p]erhaps a glimpse of the truth of my own life. Why should I otherwise take so much trouble?' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 105).

On the one hand, *The Best Intentions* is a biographical and autobiographical work. It is based on Bergman's memories and filled with sense impressions of particular objects, places, and people that were significant to his childhood and youth. On the other hand, it is a novel. How could it be autobiographical when Bergman himself was not even born as these events unfolded? The dialogues and scenes are written to create a plot and to move it to its conclusion. The characters are drawn and executed in a genuine attempt to understand their emotions, motives, and convictions. Bergman maps the past of his parents. In order to see the project through he identifies and investigates the inner most secrets of his characters, based on their actions and thoughts, the choices they made and did not make, their very different personalities and backgrounds, all the tensions and animosities, the love and despair of their early life together. This mapping requires not only that certain actions and events are brought together to be critically analyzed, interpreted, and temporally organized. They are also spatially organized in that they refer to particular places of importance: the streets of Uppsala, the illusory paradise of the summer cottage in Dufnäs, the atmosphere of Märta's dining rooms where the poor students meet and eat. It is not possible to remember or imagine a particular place or anything in

any detail without contextualization. The contextualization is tactile-kinesthetic: what it was like, what it looked like, smelled like, the sounds, the voices, the heat, or the dark and bitterly cold winter mornings in Forsboda¹ (see also HOLMBERG 2018).

In mapping his parents' past, Bergman works to discover the question for which his novel ultimately turns out to be the answer, as Robin George Collingwood famously put it in *The Idea of History* (1946/2005). Collingwood, of course, does not write about Bergman but explores the philosophical assumptions, theories and methods of historical writing. Literature based to some extent on autobiographical and biographical material: photographs, letters, diaries, memories, perceptions, and sensations raises different challenges to its author than the ones faced by the historian. The individual past is certainly different from the historical past as represented by the historian. Nevertheless, Bergman also critically employs the methods of history in investigating the minds and actions of his parents. The methods of history, according to Collingwood, involve the re-enactment of past experience. Bergman has to envisage for himself the situations in which his parents stood. Their experiences are 'to be lived through in his own mind' (COLLINGWOOD 1946/2005: 218). He has to practice historical thinking. Historical thinking involves self-consciousness (COLLINGWOOD 1946/2005: 289). I am going to argue that a particular kind of self-consciousness is pursued, not only in the way that Bergman himself tries to bring evidence to the disentanglement of thoughts and actions in the lives of his parents, but in the way that he demonstrates the movements of the mind, of Henrik's mind in particular, as Henrik struggles to reach some kind of self-knowledge or self-understanding. Bergman's novel is a work of imagination, but as Collingwood points out: '[a]s works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that the historian's picture is meant to be true' (COLLINGWOOD 1946/2005: 246). To what extent Bergman reaches the truth about his parents we do not know, but he certainly comes to his own conclusions about them, and he ties the present with the past in a particular configuration in which the characters, their actions and thoughts are bound 'by a necessity internal to themselves' (COLLINGWOOD 1946/2005: 242). Since the production of the novel is in itself a work of art, it expresses the truth of an emotion (COLLINGWOOD 1938).

Role, character, voice, and self

The narrator assigns voices to Henrik and Anna with which they speak to each other throughout the novel and film. These voices manifest how the characters fill out their roles as son and daughter, young lovers, a married couple, and a father and mother in the family they create. The novel is dominated by dialogue. Bergman explains in his foreword that he had particular players in mind when he wrote it. Descriptions and details seem to also serve as instructions to the players and the future director of the dramatic film.

1 Fictional village in the novel.

Theatrical or dramatic film production is a creative, yet disciplined, individual and collaborative exploration of human experience. As Hannah Arendt writes about the theater: 'it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others' (ARENDR 1958/1998: 188). In relating to others, we also relate to ourselves. In the theater, the distinctions between the concepts of self, role, character, voice, and identity are pragmatically rather than definitionally upheld. The theater actively works with all of them in the production of plays. Space, time, and perspective need to be organized in a complex and multifaceted interaction between the players on stage, the players and their audience, and the individual players and the characters they develop.

The good theatrical production or dramatic film depend on players who successfully move and embody their characters and speak with their voices. Players have to relate to the play they perform in an ongoing process in real and dramatic time. The play and the roles usually stay the same while players themselves change. This fact influences the way that the performative aspects of the play are experienced and organized. Even though the roles remain the same, space, time, bodily experience, and artistic discipline work back reflexively on both character and voice. Players often contribute to artistic research by discussing their individual understanding of the processes involved (BRANAGH 1988; COLE AND KRICH CHINOY 1949; HASTRUP 2004; RYLANCE 2016). Indeed, the roles, the characters, and the voices could not be performed without the resources that the players themselves bring to them. These resources are derived from the dynamics of the self. The concept of the self is as old as the theater in the Western tradition. Since Antiquity, it has been the subject of controversy. A critical assessment of the many different concepts of the self lies beyond the scope of this paper, but see GALLAGHER (2011) for a historical and philosophical examination.

In this paper, I point instead to a conceptualization of the self of particular relevance to literary studies. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes about the self as a relation that relates itself to itself. Kierkegaard considers the self to be a dynamic, present in all of our movements and actions. We cannot escape ourselves, even if we want to, and we cannot construct ourselves – create a self to our own satisfaction – even if we want to. Instead, we are tied to our own experiences, our own history. We have a genesis. If we do not respect our own history, if we do not try to develop some kind of self-knowledge or self-understanding in relating ourselves to ourselves, we deceive ourselves.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between character, role, and self (SØLTOFT 2017; PERREGAARD 2018). The role is already there. The role is a function in a wider range of capacities in a society, an institution, a family, an interactional order or a theatrical drama. How to fulfil it, however, is up to each and every individual. In fulfilling the role, a particular character is established whether we like it or not. In willingly or reluctantly fulfilling a particular role as a character we point to the kind of identity that we seem to be either tied to by others or to perform ourselves. It is indeed the endless pursuit of identity in negotiations with ourselves and others as to who we are, used to be, and would like to become that gives rise to the kind of deception and self-deception that is so prevalent in the drama of the theater, in literature, and in the actions and

narratives of everyday life. We know that adversity, disappointments in life, and lack of emotional and intellectual consistency threaten our sense of identity. The voices of Henrik and Anna, as literary characters, express and demonstrate how the vicissitudes of their existence result in sudden changes in their way of being, make them falter in the belief and confidence they have in themselves and each other, and lead to deception and self-deception in the way they act and interact. In *The Best Intentions* the different layers of deception and self-deception are indicated by the characters' movements, expressions, glances, voices, and barely perceptible changes of mood. Their involvement in deception and self-deception is gradually revealed in their dialogical actions. Henrik, in particular, is presented as someone caught between the different roles that he has to fulfil.

It is relatively easy to analyze the composition of Bergman's novel by means of traditional narratological models. It is not difficult to account for the plot or the characters or the different layers of enunciation that constitute his literary work. I claim, however, that it is quite impossible to account for the psychological makeup of these characters and the way they relate to each other without a description of the kind of dynamics of the self that seems to underlie all of their actions and choices and to be presupposed by Bergman in his investigation of the ways in which human consciousness can be dramatically and narratively represented and organized. Bergman's approach indirectly demonstrates how to strategically encircle the concepts of not only self, but also role, character, voice, and identity, their interrelations and relevance for interdisciplinary research in dramatical and literary composition as well as in the narrativity of everyday life.

Bergman includes metaphors of the theater to allow insight into the complexities of the human mind and to investigate 'man in his relationship to others' (ARENDR 1958/1998: 188). The metaphors are employed in at least five different ways (page references to the English edition):

1. The theater is seen to evoke something playful and frivolous: '[Anna] at once goes and stands beside her father, taking his arm and leaning her head on his shoulder, all of it a trifle theatrical, but affectionate, not without talent' (25); 'The siblings are clever at acting comedy. They laugh and act the fool, and Henrik is drawn into it. He has never seen such beautiful people before. He feels a violent yearning but doesn't really know what he's yearning for' (55).
2. The theater is also brought out as an imitation of life in which there are lead roles and small parts. Anna's (much) older stepbrother, Carl, describes Anna's dominating and manipulative mother in this way: 'My stepmother, Karin, plays the main part in our insignificant family drama. Mammchen is a remarkable character, considerably larger than life' (27). Similarly, the narrator introduces a couple of dinner guests in theatrical terms: 'the aging, sluggish doctor and his chattering, florid wife are two of life's first-class supernumeraries, who, without altogether too genuine emotion or altogether too violent participation, testify to our long-drawn-out tragedies and uneasy comedies' (164).

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3. The theater is furthermore conceptualized as a distributor of a set of predetermined roles that have to be played. The narrator briefly tells the story of Anna's parents, how they met and came to marry: 'It is scarcely credible that the superintendent and his thirty-years-younger wife loved each other in the romantic sense, but they acted their roles without protest and gradually became good friends' (18). When Anna has left Henrik with their young son, Dag, she celebrates Christmas with her mother and Carl. They pretend to be happy for the child's sake, but '[a] few hours later, they have used up all their strengths and the masks have cracked' (287).
 4. The theater is also used to point to something which is extremely embarrassing and painful, that we have to participate in even if we do not want to, that we have to be dragged through against our will. Henrik tells Frida about his lonely childhood and the way his mother staged him as a minister in a recurrent socio-dramatic play: 'I was the minister in cassock and dog collar. Mother and some old girl from the old people's home were the congregation. Mother played the organ, and we sang hymns. We even took communion – just imagine! Later on, I had to ask Mother to stop all that embarrassing playacting' (16). One of the most central scenes to the whole plot of the novel takes place in the chapel in Forsboda where Henrik has been appointed a long-term position. Henrik and Anna are alone in their 'unfinished church' (176) and have a violent argument over their upcoming wedding which Henrik considers to be planned as 'a spectacle' (177). Anna disagrees. She wants to have '*a proper wedding!* A really splendid, impressive festivity. I want to celebrate. I want to be joyful. I want a terrific wedding' (177). The narrator recalls how Anna once said that 'we put an end to our love as well as our engagement during that argument'. Towards the end of the scene when they both feel unhappy and try to find their way back to each other, Henrik concludes that 'a gigantic binge, in which everyone drowns in a sea of theatrical idiots, would [after all] be better' (183).
 5. Finally, the theater encapsulates and reveals the truth. Untruth is used to reveal the truth. When Anna realizes that Henrik has not broken off his engagement with Frida and she has suffered the humiliation of finding out through her own mother, she 'is looking at [Henrik] with obvious contempt, no doubt about it, and he cannot misunderstand the look in her eyes – it is for him in particular, or rather someone a long way inside the role-playing, someone who for one painful moment realizes the extent of his destitution. That's what it was like, and that's how it would be, a lifetime. *He has at last been seen*' (98).

These few examples illustrate how Bergman uses metaphors of the theater to bring out the dilemmas, struggles, feelings of entrapment, and arrested anger in his characters. The metaphors also point to the way that something has to be brought to the scene and put into motion before it becomes possible to play and act.

Deception and self-deception

At the beginning of the novel, Henrik is studying theology at the university in Uppsala and is about to take his exam in church history. He fails miserably and now dreads telling his mother, Alma. His father died when he was young. Alma has struggled ever since and has raised Henrik alone. As a young widow, she asked for help but was rejected by her father-in-law because of previous disagreements between father and son. She has taken out a considerable loan from more distant family members in order to pay for Henrik's studies in Uppsala, but now they do not have any money left to pay for the last two years of his education. Alma puts all of her hopes and aspirations into the glorious, religious future that she imagines for her son. Henrik is poor and lonely but secretly engaged to Frida, a young waitress, whom he has known for two years. He meets Anna (Bergman's future mother) and her well-to-do family through her brother, Ernst, with whom Henrik sings in the university choir. When Henrik finally confesses his failure to his mother, Alma decides to trick the distant aunts into providing them with yet another, and much bigger, loan. She states: 'I've heard that really talented frauds never bother with small change. They go straight for the big money' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 33). Together the two of them lie to their family members. The aunts see through the deceit but, out of pity, they grant the loan. This, of course, is even more humiliating to mother and son. Alma deceives the aunts. Henrik deceives Alma in hiding his engagement to Frida. He deceives Frida in denying any relationship with her when confronted by Anna's stepbrother, Carl. When Henrik falls in love with Anna he tells her that he is already engaged. But when Anna is under the impression that he has broken off his engagement he continues to meet with Frida. All of Henrik's most intimate relationships are fraught with deception. Bergman cleverly reveals the psychological implications of deception by showing the lack of action that Henrik performs and by making the roles that he has to perform appear to him to be internally contradictory or impossible for him to play at once. In this way, Bergman's techniques of composition reveal what the characters mean to conceal.

From a Kierkegaardian perspective, however, the most serious kind of deception is the kind of *self*-deception that is at work at the same time. If we are – and, again, this is my argument – to account for the kind of self-deception that takes place, we need to be able to operate with a concept of a dynamic self, a self that relates itself to itself. Kierkegaard's self-concept is well-suited for the purpose of peeling off the layers of conflict. In investigating the phenomenon of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, describes the manifestation of despair as a conflict of the self: not wanting to be oneself while, at the same time, being unable to escape oneself. This, I believe, is at the heart of the first part of Bergman's novel. Henrik does not want to be himself. In fact, he struggles to get away from himself. Anna represents a *joie de vivre*, an intellectual as well as material abundance that he has never met before and that promises to take him away from the misery of his own early life. At the same time, Henrik is, of course, inevitably tied to his own experiences that are both characterized by the kind of pride he takes in being principled, in standing up

for himself in situations of conflict, and by the kind of humiliation that continuously follows from poverty and rejection. As a student of theology, despair, more than faith, characterizes his state of mind. A self-deceived man does not understand himself, as pointed out by the narrator: 'Henrik has not much self-insight, never has had, and never will have' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 59). When he suggests to Anna that they get to know each other by revealing their own character flaws he confesses that his greatest flaw is confusion: 'I am confused. Understand nothing. I just do what other people tell me ... I have so many feelings. That also confuses me. I've nearly always got a guilty conscience, but mostly don't know why' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 61). This confusion is the cause of his inaction. People act on his behalf: Frida breaks off their engagement and Anna decides on their marriage.

The Swedish title of *The Best Intentions* is *The Good Will*. It refers to Paul's letter to the Romans 7:19: 'For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do' (from The King James Version). The good will is mentioned a number of times throughout the novel (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 27, 82, 139, 179, 262, 298). The will seems to be at conflict with itself. From an existential philosophical point of view, that means that even if we know better we still have the *freedom* to do the wrong thing. Henrik's will is in conflict with what he knows. He does not want to know what he knows. He knows that he lies to his mother, to Frida, to Anna, to Ernst and to Carl. He knows and yet he *willingly* acts as if he did not know. He deliberately obfuscates his own consciousness, his knowledge of his own circumstances, so that he can live a dream instead:

'Henrik stares steadily at the two siblings, calling a halt to time. It's not to slip away in the old way this time. Nothing has ever been like this before. He didn't know such colors existed. A closed room opens. The light gets stronger, and his head whirls: Naturally it *can* be like this. So it can be like this for himself as well' (56).

In a Kierkegaardian sense, what happens to Henrik is that 'possibility outstrips necessity' so that 'the self runs away from itself in possibility' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 66). In fact, 'possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more becomes possible because nothing becomes actual. In the end it seems as though everything were possible, but that is the very moment that the self is swallowed up in the abyss' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 66).

Henrik has some kind of awareness that this state of possibility, completely severed from necessity, is false. He repeatedly says to Anna that what they share will be taken away from him again: 'I think all this will be taken away from me. It's always like that. It has always been like that. I am empty-handed. That sounds dramatic, but it's true. I think, quite simply, why should any of what I've had today fall to my lot? Do you understand, Anna? You and Ernst live in your world, not just materially, but on all levels. Inaccessible to me. Do you understand, Anna?' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 59. See also 87, 163, 182, 278).

According to Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus we are ourselves responsible for our self-deception. We inflict it on ourselves. We darken our own minds and prevent ourselves from becoming ourselves. There are two ways of darkening: 'in despair not wanting

to be oneself, or wanting in despair to be oneself' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 109). Henrik suffers from both: in the first part of the novel he refuses to relate to the necessity of his own circumstances and does not want to be himself. In the second part of the novel he constructs an identity for himself to match an abstract set of ideals. He desperately wants to be himself for himself. But neither is possible. Henrik lives in despair because he tries to overcome the necessity of his own circumstances by either neglecting or constructing them. Since, however, these are indeed formed by necessity, they cannot be overcome. Self-deception, then, is the path that he chooses.

The point about the self is that as a relation that relates itself to itself it is a dynamic. The dynamics of the self are the resources – or the lack thereof – that we bring to the roles that we must play in society and to the characters that we must build in fulfilling these roles. To Kierkegaard 'the self's being is *in* its becoming' (WELZ 2011: 157). To become oneself requires a continuous effort. The role of a young pastor in the Church of Sweden is or was the same role. Any young man with the right educational background and qualifications could fill in the spot, but Henrik, of course, fulfils it in his particular way in accordance with his belief in God, his understanding of human nature and his set of values. Based on this set of values he builds a character for himself in order to fulfil the role. The character, however, has no real connection to the challenges that he needs to face. It therefore becomes a hollow character.

The identity that Henrik gradually claims for himself increasingly stands in opposition to the kind of experiences and values that characterized Anna's childhood and youth. The parish Henrik is assigned to is in an isolated part of Northern Sweden where most people live hard lives in severe poverty. Henrik seems to strive for an identity that will allow a quiet, modest, and ascetic way of life that reflects the hardship of his community and congregation. While he is, in some respects, in an honest pursuit of what he believes to be true, he is also cleverly demasked by Bergman who shows us how this new identity is grounded in defiance and encapsulates Henrik's feeling of inferiority. This is how Henrik willingly enters into the second kind of self-deception. He has reached some self-knowledge in understanding why he does not want to be himself. He has realized his own weakness. Yet 'the initial expression of defiance is precisely despair over one's weakness' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 97). Henrik's despair has become 'conscious of itself as an activity' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 99). It has become an act of defiance. In Anti-Climacus's words Henrik now 'wants in despair to rule over himself, or create himself, make this self the self he wants to be, determine what he will have and what he will not have in his concrete self' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 99). But this new way of life also becomes a way of executing power over some of his parishioners and his own wife who suffocates in this gloomy atmosphere of seriousness.

Anna leaves Henrik with their two year old son. At the time she is pregnant with Ingmar. She moves back to her mother in Uppsala.

Untruth as a passing to the truth

According to Anti-Climacus it is vital to have clarity (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 78). But Henrik has no clarity. Clarity, instead, is a personal characteristic ascribed to Anna's mother, Karin, who is 'clear-sighted' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 18). Anna herself explicitly strives for clarity: 'Mama says that the most important thing is to keep one's emotions under control. I've always been sensible about that' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 58). (In the original, the phrase 'att hålla reda på sina känslor' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 84, Swedish edition) actually means to have clarity rather than control).

Momentarily, and towards the end of the novel, Henrik believes to be seeing himself clearly: 'I have to face myself everyday. That's fairly dismal, but an invaluable experience' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 294). This clarity, however, rests in the awareness of the negative. Henrik momentarily experiences truth and freedom when he realizes and is finally able to articulate the ways in which untruth has ruled every aspect of his existence. In interpreting Kierkegaard's dynamic concept of the self, Arne Grøn writes that: 'one is to live *as oneself*, also when one changes' (GRØN 2010: 88). A few months after Anna has left him, Henrik tries to do exactly that and to explain himself to Magda, the niece and housekeeper of Reverend Gransjö in Forsboda:

'I have to live in privation. Then, and *only then*, can I possibly be a good priest. As I want to be, but have never been *able* to be. I am not created for larger contexts. I'm not terribly bright, no, I say that with no false modesty. But I know that I'd be a good worker in the vineyards if I could live without sidelong glances' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 294).

Henrik goes on to talk about his sermon: 'The sermon is about the fig tree that refused to bear fruit. And it's owner said, cut down that tree. It stands there year after year and sucks good out of my soil' and Magda continues: 'Yes I know, I know. And the worker in the vineyard said, let me look after the fig tree especially well, then we can see if it doesn't bear fruit' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 294). In order to completely eradicate despair and self-deception the self needs to relate to itself in wanting to become itself. The self needs to rest 'transparently in the power that established it' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 44). To Kierkegaard that power, of course, is God: 'describing a state in which no despair exists at all ... is also the formula for faith' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 79).

My question is: Does Henrik's marriage and the compromises it requires make it too difficult for him to become himself in overcoming himself? The marriage as a 'life catastrophe' was predicted by Karin: 'I like to think I know my daughter fairly well, and I believe a liaison with you, Mr. Bergman, would lead to a catastrophe. That is a strong word and I know it may seem exaggerated, but nonetheless, I must use the word. *A major catastrophe*. I cannot think of a more impossible and fateful combination than between our Anna and Henrik Bergman' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 90). In the Swedish original the word *livskatastrof*, life catastrophe, rather than major catastrophe is used. Throughout the novel when something decisive has happened or is about to happen, the following words are used (page references to the Swedish original):

- life catastrophe: *livskatastrof* (127)
 life important: *livsviktigt* (84)
 life dependent: *livsavgörande* (85, 307, 320)
 life matter: *livsak* (159)
 life assignment: *livsuppgift* (316)

At the time, Henrik responds to Karin by insisting on the power of love: 'Love as the only earthly miracle. A miracle that transforms. The only real salvation' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 90). The end of the novel begs the question as to whether the couple is reunited due to the miracle of love or due to the societal conventions that bid them to play their roles and live through the catastrophe of their marriage. Henrik is deeply unhappy and extremely lonely when he finally gives in to Anna's wishes. In order to save their marriage, he agrees to accept a new position in Stockholm so that she does not have to live in Forsboda.

The temporality of truth in the title of this paper refers to the fact that the conditions for reaching the truth are time-bound. According to Kierkegaard: '[d]esperair is itself a negativity, ignorance of it a new negativity. But to arrive at the truth one has to pass through every negativity' (KIERKEGAARD 1849/2004: 74). In that way 'truth can only be produced by the individual in the consciousness of her untruth and thus in action' (HANSON 2010: xix). This action, of course, takes place in time and across time. Indeed, drama and narration seem to occupy such a central part in the lives of human beings due to two inescapable facts of existence: that time is irreversible (LØGSTRUP 1978), and that actions have unintended consequences (TENGEYI 2012). We can evaluate, speculate, and manipulate and we can deceive ourselves and others in the actions we perform and the stories we tell, but we cannot undo our own experiences, or the actions that we have already performed, as we are inextricably linked to the spatial, causal, and temporal conditions of our own being in the world. Whatever we once lived through, we can try to forget or repress; or we can try to express and organize it in what we choose to tell other people. Indeed, the need to repeatedly return to the same events of our lives and to tell new narratives about them seems to be provoked by the way in which intended and unintended consequences of our own and other people's actions keep catching up with us. Whatever the consequences, they reveal new aspects, pose different challenges, and demand revised explanations and interpretations of their effects on our lives. I believe that these philosophical insights are important to the analysis of literature – particularly to biographical and autobiographical literature. Truth takes time.

Before they get married, Henrik and Anna decide to be careful with the truth. Henrik says: '[w]e'll be truthful. Faithful to the truth' and Anna says: '[w]e'll try to be truthful' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 134). In the Swedish original Anna says 'Vi ska *bemöda oss med sanningen*' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 186, Swedish edition) which means to be careful with or to take great pains over the truth. To Bergman, perhaps, the truth ultimately lies with the artist. It is the responsibility of the artist to express the truth, not to shy away from it. The truth is not there in advance to be just told. It has to be articulated

in the process of creating art. As also Collingwood (1938) wrote, art comes with the imaginative and truthful expression of an emotion. In *The Best Intentions* this position is articulated by Nathan Söderblom, a professor of theology whose continuous help and support is critical to Henrik's faith, career, and development of self-consciousness. To Söderblom, the artists 'demonstrate God's presence' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 119). Söderblom tries to convince Henrik that he should not '*demand* clarity, security, insight. Try to understand that God is part of his creation, just as Bach lives in his B-minor mass. You're interpreting a composition. Sometimes it's puzzling, but that's unavoidable. When you let the music sound – then you evince Bach. Read the notes! And play them as best you can. But don't doubt the existence of Bach and the Creator' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 119).

It is also Söderblom, and before him, Frida, who understand that Henrik's despair comes from anxiety. According to Kierkegaard, anxiety is vital to our existence (KIERKEGAARD 1844/1980). It is through anxiety that we get to know the possibility of freedom. We get to choose. Söderblom tries to explain to Henrik that he can, in fact, bring his own suffering to an end: 'I think you're capable of great devotion. I can see that you bear with you a profound desire to sacrifice yourself, but you don't know how. Your sense of being worthless stands in the way. You are your own worst enemy and jailer. Get up out of your prison. To your surprise, you will find that no one will stop you. Don't be afraid. The reality outside your cell is never as terrible as your terror inside your imprisoning darkroom' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 119).

It is not enough to truly acknowledge oneself. One has to truly acknowledge the Other. As Grøn (2010) discusses in his reading of Kierkegaard's texts, the miracle of love depends on a particular kind of acknowledgement. In the scene in the chapel, when Henrik and Anna argue and put an end to their love and engagement, what really happens is that they reduce each other to representatives of the different social classes that they belong to, and attribute to each other the habits, manners, and values generally associated with those classes. The brutality of the scene comes from the fact that Henrik and Anna cease to be, in each other's eyes, those individual, unique human beings they once fell in love with. Henrik seems to Anna to 'be painfully lower-class': 'It's not necessary' she tells him 'to wear dirty shirts and have holes in your socks. It's not necessary to go around with dandruff on your collar and dirty nails' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 178–179). Anna seems to Henrik to be spoiled and condescending: 'There's no limit to how spoiled you are' he says: 'I remember when you asked me what Frida did, and I told you she was a waitress. I remember your tone of voice. I remember your expression' (BERGMAN 1991/2018: 178–179). In reducing each other to class identities, to stereotypical characters who play out their roles in predictable ways they deprive each other of that acknowledgement. They no longer *see* each other. The immediate truth, however, is not the whole truth. There is always *more*. We are, in fact, *more* than the roles we play, the characters we develop, the identities we perform or orient ourselves to. Philosophically, these concepts presuppose another concept: the concept of a dynamic self, an embodied, relational self that *moves* and *changes*. It is in the vitality of the human body, in the expressiveness of the human voice that this 'moreness' can be sensed,

imagined, and, perhaps, acknowledged. It is in recognition of this 'moreness' that love becomes possible, that love is, perhaps, realized in loving action. Literature, the good theatrical production, or dramatic film make us aware that one way of seeing excludes another, but also that a particular way of seeing can make us realize the ways in which we are not only given to ourselves and each other, but given to *understand* ourselves and each other (GRØN 2010). Even if deception and self-deception become part of the process of relating and understanding there is the *possibility* of freedom, choice, and acknowledgement. It is Bergman's genius for dramatic characterization that makes *The Best Intentions* such a compelling human drama. Creatively, imaginatively, and truthfully, Bergman expresses, articulates and communicates the terror of the darkroom as well as the bliss of the earthly miracle.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to The Danish-American Fulbright Commission and to Niels Bohr Fondet and Ragna Rask-Nielsens Grundforskningsfond under the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters for funding this study.

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