

## Afterword

Paul L. Holmer

*Self-Effacing, Swaggering, Nonpareil*

AN INKLING. AN INKLING, surely, but perhaps more as I attended Paul Holmer's Tuesday evening lectures on Kierkegaard at Yale Divinity School, spring semester, 1966. Perhaps I knew how very special this opportunity was, how fortunate I was. On Tuesday evening, April 12, Holmer said he was going to address again the "certainty / uncertainty" issues in Kierkegaard "because last week was such a travesty on my part." I had never heard a professor say anything like that. But I had never heard a professor like Paul Holmer. On May 17, he concluded the course by saying, "I hope the lectures haven't failed the quality of the man." I was sure the lectures had not.

Professor Holmer also remarked during that semester that "theology can only be communicated directly with a loss." With manifold indirections, he pitted himself against such loss. At Richard Bell's splendid symposium at The College of Wooster, March 1987, in honor of Paul Holmer, "The Grammar of the Heart: Thinking with Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein,"<sup>1</sup> many tributes were paid Paul Holmer. Mine was a reading of this passage from Johannes Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments*:

. . . the fact that I have been instructed by Socrates or by Prodicus or by a servant-girl, can concern me only historically; or in so far as I am a Plato in sentimental enthusiasm,

1. See Richard H. Bell, ed., *The Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

it may concern me poetically. But this enthusiasm, beautiful as it is, and such that I could wish both for myself and all others a share of this εὐκαταφορία εἰς πάθος, which only a Stoic could frown upon; and though I may be lacking in the Socratic magnanimity and the Socratic self-denial to think its nothingness—this enthusiasm, so Socrates would say, is only an illusion, a want of clarity in a mind where earthly inequalities seethe almost voluptuously.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Holmer was appreciative of the selected passage and probably also of the irony that the celebration of a celebrated teacher be marked by a wariness of such celebration.

Yet there was swaggering, a polemical swagger; and that, of course, added to the interest. Professor Holmer concludes his “Preface” to *The Grammar of Faith*:

It would be most surprising if my debt to colleagues and teachers, students and authors, was not apparent. But a remark of Scipio’s, the statesman and conqueror of Hannibal at Zama (202 B.C.), is appropriate. He said that he was never less idle than when he had nothing to do, and never less lonely than when he was by himself. The reflections in these pages have mostly come about when attempts were being made to make sense for and by myself.<sup>3</sup>

In an “interview” with Paul Holmer at St. Olaf College, June 1988, I asked Professor Holmer to retell a story he had mentioned in an earlier public address:

Well, she [Lillian Marvin Swenson] came with this letter [from Norman Malcolm]. She didn’t know who Norman Malcolm was. He was a young graduate student, actually, at Cambridge University. And he had written to her because he had found out about the translation of Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. She wanted to know who he was, and she wanted to know who Wittgenstein was, who was referred to in the letter. . . . I knew about Wittgenstein, but I didn’t know Norman Malcolm. So I assured her that Wittgenstein was worthy of getting a copy of the book. And so Mrs. Swenson sent the volume, a new translation from Princeton Press, of Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*. And then some time later, almost within a

2. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 14–15.

3. Holmer, *Grammar of Faith*, xii.

month, I think, Malcolm wrote back and said about this . . . that . . . [Wittgenstein] had received the book and read the book and so on. Mrs. Swenson referred him [Malcolm] to me. . . . He then corresponded further with me. I asked Malcolm outright what Wittgenstein thought of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. He told me that Wittgenstein had already read it in the German translation, didn't like the German, had tried it in Danish and, because of his knowledge of Norwegian, he was able to read it; but it wasn't clear to him. So he wanted to try it in English translation. But Malcolm told me that Wittgenstein said it was much too high for him. And so I wrote to Malcolm and said, "What does he mean by *that*?" And then he wrote back and said, "It was as if he [Wittgenstein] couldn't manage those intense passions and feelings that were involved in Kierkegaard's volume." And then Malcolm pointed out to me that the lovely thing about Wittgenstein was that he didn't blame Kierkegaard for that. He thought it was his own weakness. And I thought that was a right and true remark.<sup>4</sup>

Swagger (by indirect implication) seems eclipsed by self-effacement. Paul Holmer lived and *was* a dialectic of earnestness and irony. Irony perhaps had the edge—perhaps because of earnestness. His mouth was a runaway, somewhere between a scowl and a smirk—or not between but *both*.

At the end of our time at Yale Divinity School, my wife Marlyne and I invited Paul Holmer over to the Canner Street apartments for a lunch to say thank you. This was May 31, 1967. I know because he dated the guestbook and wrote: "Only the truth which edifies is truth for you."

David Cain  
Distinguished Professor of Religion  
University of Mary Washington

4. Cain, "Appendix" to "Appreciation of Roger Poole," 480–81.