My letter to the TLS ...

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-------- Original Message --------
Subject: Kierkegaard kerfuffle
From: <mark@gaigebusinesswriting.com>
Date: Fri, November 01, 2019 4:03 pm
To: letters@the-tls.co.uk

Sir, – I'm with M. G. Piety.

In her letter in defense of her book, Clare Carlisle says that she “cannot tell whether [reviewer M. G. Piety] ... was unable or unwilling to approach my Life of Kierkegaard on its own terms, ie as a literary work combining biography and philosophy."

Many authors have combined biography and philosophy. For example, Hume: An Intellectual Biography, by James A. Harris; Descartes: An Intellectual Biography, by Stephen Gaukroger; Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography, by Maria Rosa Antognazza; and Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography, by Julian Young. But they do not impute thoughts and feelings to their subjects that they cannot possibly know. If Carlisle wants to do so, fine, but call it for what it is: “historical fiction,” or, as she seems to prefer, “a literary work,” which is the point Piety clearly made.

Carlisle writes: “I do know, however, that her [Piety's] claim that the book's references are incomplete is simply false.” I'm not sure how something is “simply” false rather than false, but Piety's response letter documents numerous omissions.
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Carlisle loses me when she writes that she aims “to express the troubled truth of [Kierkegaard’s] experience, and to explore with him the open question of how to be a human being in the world.” With all due respect, this is psychobabble. I don’t know what a troubled truth of experience is, or why Carlisle feels she is qualified or entitled to do these things under the banner of non-fiction, but since life is too short, I’d rather not waste time trying to guess.

In his letter George Pattison says that “it is quite clear to any sensitive reader that Carlisle is not claiming to have direct and demonstrable insight into the undocumented workings of Kierkegaard’s mind.” I don’t know how Pattison can claim to know what any “sensitive” reader would know; he seems to be trying to out-Carlisle Carlisle.

Christopher Insole writes that Piety’s “review put me in mind of the story of the (no doubt apocryphal) French logician, who patiently listened through every note of a Beethoven symphony, only to turn to his companion, and ask, ‘and what, precisely, have we learned from that?’“ Argument by analogy is often specious; a point underscored by Insole’s letter. I wouldn’t expect to “learn” anything from a Beethoven symphony. I would, however, expect to learn something, namely facts, from a biography.

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